PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

HOOFBEATS on the TURNPIKE

by MILDRED A. WIRT

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

By Mildred A. Wirt

Presenting a sparkling new series of stories filled with swift, compelling action and mystery by the popular, accomplished author of mystery stories – Mildred A. Wirt.

Featuring a daring, live-wire heroine–Penny Parker, daughter of a newspaper editor and a girl with a real "nose for news"–these stories with their glamorous newspaper background unfold a series of baffling mysteries that lead the unofficial girl reporter into countless thrills and dangers.

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THE WISHING WELL
SABOTEURS ON THE RIVER
GHOST BEYOND THE GATE
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TO PARENTS

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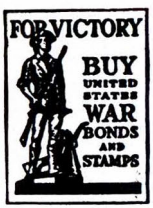

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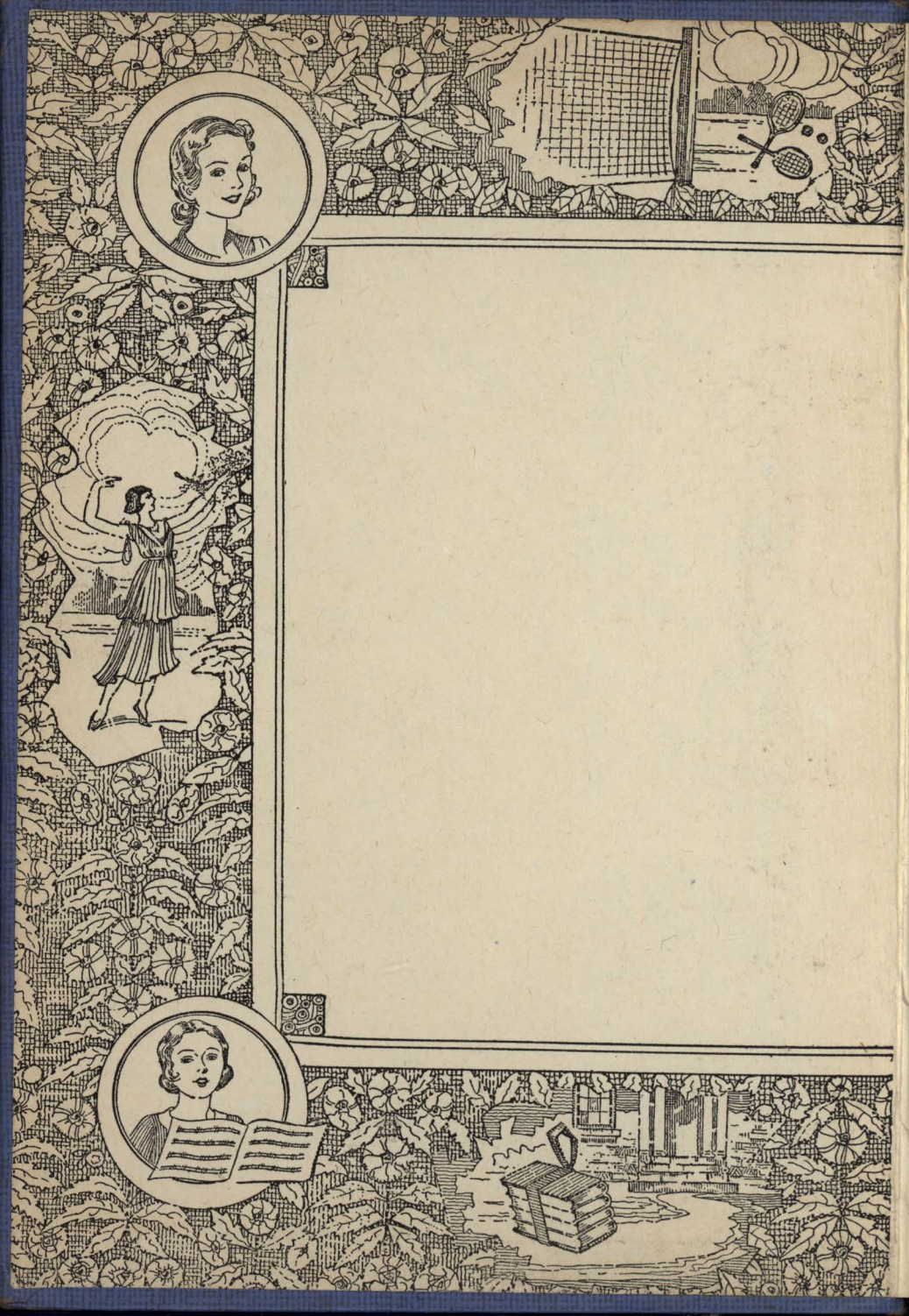
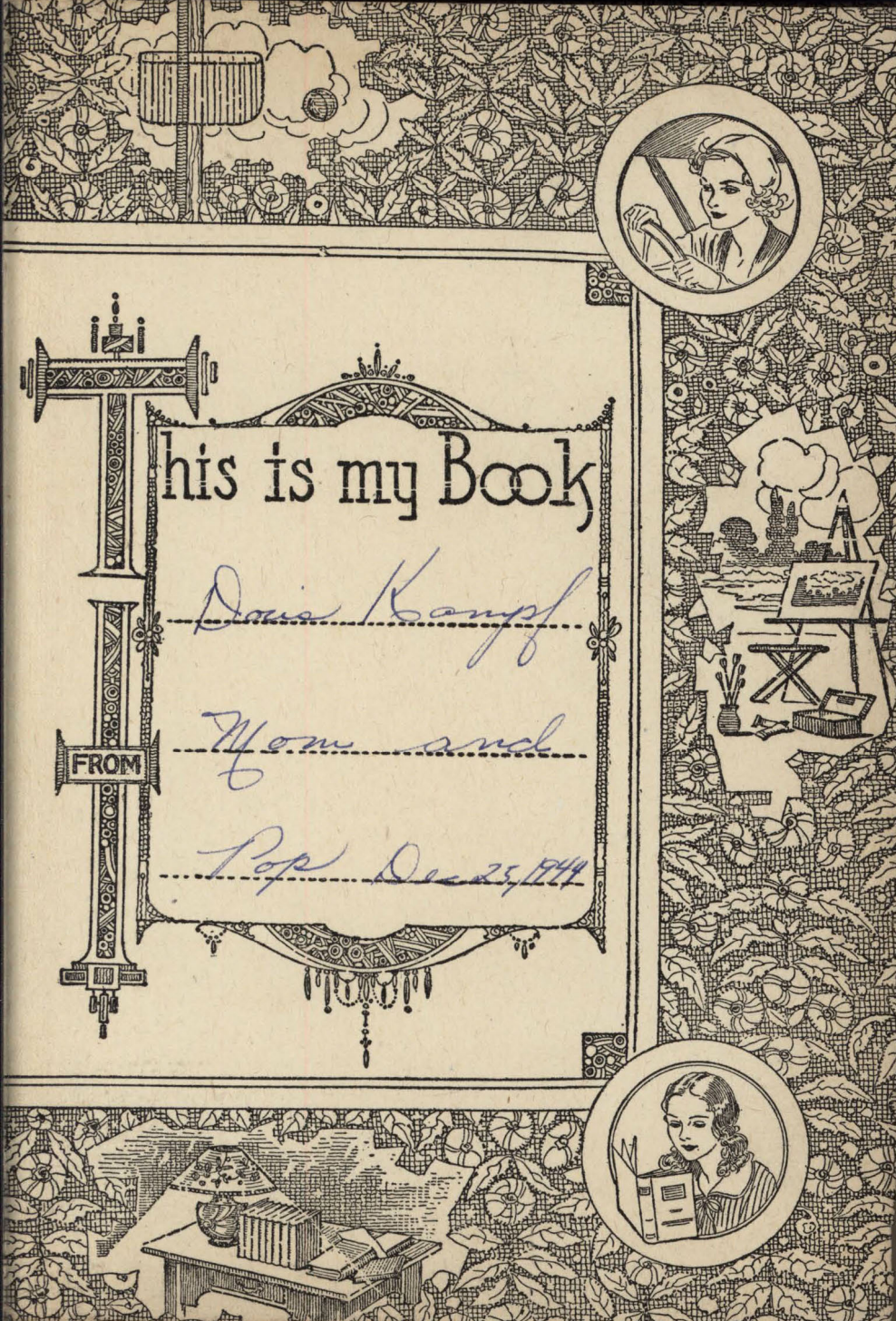
MILDRED A. WIRT




This is my Book
Dana Kampf
FROM
Mom and
Pop Dec 25, 1944

"I'VE BEEN ROBBED!" MRS. LEAR PROCLAIMED WILDLY.

"Hoofbeats on the Turnpike"

(See Page 100)

Hoofbeats on the Turnpike

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES

Illustrated

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY

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NEW YORK

PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

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GHOST BEYOND THE GATE
HOOFBEATS ON THE TURNPIKE

Other Titles in Preparation

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Hoofbeats on the Turnpike

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CHAPTER

1

OLD MAN OF THE HILLS

A GIRL in crumpled linen slacks skidded to a fast stop on the polished floor of the *Star* business office. With a flourish, she pushed a slip of paper through the bars of the treasurer's cage. She grinned beguilingly at the man who was totaling a long column of figures.

"Top o' the morning, Mr. Peters," she chirped. "How about cashing a little check for me?"

The bald-headed, tired looking man peered carefully at the crisp rectangle of paper. Regretfully he shook his head.

"Sorry, Miss Parker. I'd like to do it, but orders are orders. Your father said I wasn't to pass out a penny without his okay."

"But I'm stony broke! I'm destitute!" The blue eyes became eloquent, pleading. "My allowance doesn't come due for another ten days."

"Why not talk it over with your father?"

Penny retrieved the check and tore it to bits. "I've already worked on Dad until I'm blue in the face," she grumbled. "Talking to a mountain gives one a lot more satisfaction."

"Now you know your father gives you almost everything you want," the treasurer teased. "You have a car of your own—"

"And no gas to run it," Penny cut in. "Why, I work like a galley slave helping Dad build up the circulation of this newspaper!"

"You have brought the *Star* many new subscribers," Mr. Peters agreed warmly. "I'll always remember that fine story you wrote about the Vanishing Houseboat Mystery. It was one of the best this paper ever published."

"What's the use of being the talented, only daughter of a prosperous newspaper owner if you can't cash in on it now and then?" Penny went on. "Why, the coffers of this old paper fairly drip gold, but do I ever get any of it?"

"I'll let you have a few dollars," Mr. Peters offered unexpectedly. "Enough to tide you over until the day your allowance falls due. You see, I know how it is because I have a daughter of my own."

Penny's chubby, freckled face brightened. Then the light faded. She asked doubtfully:

"You don't intend to give me the money out of your own pocket, Mr. Peters?"

"Why, yes. I wouldn't dare go against your father's orders, Penny. He said no more of your checks were to be cashed without his approval."

Unfolding several crisp new bills from his wallet, the treasurer offered them to Penny. She gazed at the money with deep longing, then firmly pushed it back.

"Thanks, Mr. Peters, but it has to be Dad's money or none. You see, I have a strict code of honor."

"Sorry," replied the treasurer. "I'd like to help you."

"Oh, I'll struggle on somehow."

With a deep sigh, Penny turned away from the cage. She was a slim, blue-eyed girl whose enthusiasms often carried her into trouble. Her mother was dead, but though she had been raised by Mrs. Weems, a faithful housekeeper, she was not in the least spoiled. Nevertheless, because her father, Anthony Parker, publisher of the *Riverview Star* was indulgent, she usually had her way about most matters. From him she had learned many details of the newspaper business. In fact, having a flare for reporting, she had written many of the paper's finest stories.

Penny was a friendly, loveable little person. Not for long could she remain downhearted. As she walked down the long hallway, its great expanse of polished floor suddenly looked as inviting as an ice pond. With a quick little run she slid its length.

And at the elevator corner she collided full-tilt with a bent old man who hobbled along on a crooked hickory cane.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry!" Penny apologized. "I didn't know anyone was coming. I shouldn't have taken this hall on high."

The unexpected collision had winded the old man. He staggered a step backwards and Penny grasped his arm to offer support. She could not fail to stare. Never before in the *Star* office had she seen such a queer looking old fellow. He wore loose-fitting, coarse garments with heavy boots. His hair, snow white, had not been cut in many weeks. The grotesque effect was heightened by a straw hat several sizes too small which was perched atop his head.

"I'm sorry," Penny repeated. "I guess I didn't know where I was going."

" 'Pears like we is in the same boat, Miss," replied the old man in a cracked voice. " 'Lows as how I don't know where I'm goin' my own self."

"Then perhaps I can help you. Are you looking for someone in this building?"

The old man took a grimy sheet of paper from a tattered coat pocket.

"I want to find the feller who will print this advertisement for me," he explained carefully. "I want everybody who takes the newspaper to read it. I got cash money to pay for it too." He drew a greasy

bill from an ancient wallet and waved it proudly before Penny. "Ye see, Miss, I got cash money. I ain't no moocher."

Penny hid a smile. Not only did the old man look queer but his conversation was equally quaint. She thought that he must come from an isolated hill community many miles distant.

"I'll show you the way to the ad department," she offered, guiding him down the hall. "I see you have your advertisement written out."

"Yes, Miss." The old man hobbled along beside her. "My old woman wrote it all down. She was well edijikated before we got hitched."

Proudly he offered Penny the paper which bore several lines of neatly inscribed script. The advertisement, long and awkwardly worded, offered for sale an old spinning wheel, an ancient loom and a set of wool carders.

"My old woman used to be one o' the best weavers in Hobostein county," the old man explained with pride. "She could make a man a pair o' jeans that'd wear like they had growed to his hide. But they ain't no call for real weavin' no more. Everything is cheapened down machine stuff these days."

"Where is your home?" Penny questioned curiously.

"Me and my old woman was born and raised in the Red River Valley. Ever been there?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"It's one of the purtiest spots God ever made," the old man said proudly. "You never seen such green pastures, an' the hills kinda take your breath away. Only at night there's strange creatures trackin' through the woods, and some says there's haunts—"

Penny glanced quickly at her companion. "Haunts?" she inquired.

Before the old man could answer they had reached the want-ad counter. An employee of the papar immediately appeared to accept the advertisement. His rapid-fire questions as he counted words and assessed charges, bewildered the old hillman. Penny supplied the answers as best she could. However, in her haste to be finished with the task, she forgot to have the old fellow leave name and address.

"You were saying something about haunts," she reminded him eagerly as they walked away from the desk. "You don't really believe in ghosts do you, Mister—"

"Silas Malcom," the old man supplied. "That's my name and there ain't a better one in Hobostein County. So you be interested in haunts?"

"Well, yes, I am," Penny admitted, her eyes dancing. "I like all types of mystery. Just lead me to it!"

"Well, here's something that will make your pretty eyes pop." Chuckling, the old man fumbled in his

pocket and produced a worn newspaper clipping. Penny saw that it had been clipped from the Hobostein County Weekly. It read:

"Five hundred dollars reward offered for any information leading to the capture of the Headless Horseman. For particulars see J. Burmaster, Sleepy Hollow."

"This *is* a strange advertisement," Penny commented aloud. "The only Headless Horseman to my knowledge was the famous Galloping Hessian in the story, 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow.' But in reality such things can't exist."

"Maybe not," said the old man, "but we got one in the valley just the same. An' if what folks says is so, that Headless Horseman's likely to make a heap o' trouble fer someone before he's through his hauntin'."

Penny stared soberly into the twinkling blue eyes of her aged companion. As a character he completely baffled her. Did he mean what he said or was he merely trying to lead her on with hints of mystery? At any rate, the bait was too tempting to resist.

"Tell me more," she urged. "Exactly what do you know about this advertisement?"

"Nothin'. Nary a thing, Miss. But there's haunts at Sleepy Hollow and don't you think there ain't. I've seen 'em myself from Witching Rock."

"And where is Witching Rock?" Even the words intrigued Penny.

"Jest a place on Humpy Hill lookin' down over the Valley."

Finding her companion none too willing to impart additional information, Penny reread the advertisement. The item had appeared in the Hobostein County paper only the previous week. The words themselves rather than the offer of a reward enchanted her.

"Headless Horseman—Witching Rock!" she thought excitedly. "Why, even the names scream of mystery!"

Aloud she urged: "Mr. Malcom, do tell me more about the matter. Who is Mr. Burmaster?"

There was no answer. Penny glanced up from the advertisement and stared in astonishment. The elderly man no longer stood beside her. Not a soul was in the long empty hall. The old man of the hills had vanished as quietly as if spirited away by an unseen hand.

CHAPTER

2

PLANS

"NOW WHAT became of that old man?" Penny asked herself in perplexity. "I didn't hear him steal away. He couldn't have vanished into thin air! Or did he?"

Thinking that Mr. Malcom might have gone back to the want-ad department, she hastily returned there. To her anxious inquiry, the clerk responded with a grin:

"No, Old Whiskers hasn't been here. If you find him, ask for his address. He forgot to leave it."

Decidedly disturbed, Penny ran down the hall which gave exit to the street. Breathlessly she asked the elevator attendant if he had seen an old man leave the building.

"A fellow with a long white beard?"

"Yes, and a cane. Which way did he go?"

"Can't tell you that."

"But you did see him?" Penny demanded impatiently.

"Sure, he went out the door a minute or two ago. He was talking to himself like he was a bit cracked in the head. He was chuckling as if he knew a great joke."

"And I'm it," Penny muttered.

She darted through the revolving doors to the street. With the noon hour close at hand throngs of persons poured from the various offices. Amid the bustling, hurrying crowd she saw no one who remotely resembled the old man of the hills.

"He slipped away on purpose!" she thought half-resentfully. "He gave me the newspaper clipping just to stir my interest, and then left without explaining a thing!"

Abandoning the search as hopeless, Penny again reread the clipping. Five hundred dollars offered for information leading to the capture of a Headless Horseman! Why, it sounded fantastic. But the advertisement actually had appeared in a country newspaper. Therefore, it must have some basis of fact.

Still mulling the matter over in her mind, Penny climbed a long flight of stairs to the *Star* news room. Near the door stood an empty desk. For many years that desk had been occupied by Jerry Livingston, crack reporter, now absent on military leave. It gave Penny a tight feeling to see the covered typewriter, for she and Jerry had shared many grand times together.

She went quickly on, past a long row of desks where other reporters tapped out their stories. She nodded to Mr. DeWitt, the city editor, waved at Salt Sommers, photographer, and entered her father's private office.

"Hello, Dad," she greeted him cheerfully. "Busy?"

"I was."

Anthony Parker put aside the mouthpiece of a dictaphone machine to smile fondly at his one and only child. He was a tall, lean man and a recent illness had left him even thinner than before.

Penny sank into an upholstered chair in front of her father's desk.

"If it's money you want," began Mr. Parker, "the answer is no! Not one cent until your allowance is due. And no sob story please."

"Why, Dad." Penny shot him an injured look. "I wasn't even thinking of money—at least not such a trivial amount as exchanges hands on my allowance day. Nothing less than five hundred dollars interests me."

"Five hundred dollars!"

"Oh, I aim to earn it myself," Penny assured him hastily.

"How may I ask?"

"Maybe by catching a Headless Horseman," Penny grinned mischievously. "It seems that one is galloping wild out Red Valley way."

"Red Valley? Never heard of the place." Mr. Parker began to show irritation. "Penny, what are you talking about anyway?"

"This," explained Penny, spreading the clipping on the desk. "An old fellow who looked like Rip Van Winkle gave it to me. Then he disappeared before I could ask any questions. What do you think, Dad?"

Mr. Parker read the advertisement at a glance. "Bunk!" he exploded. "Pure bunk!"

"But Dad," protested Penny hotly. "It was printed in the Hobostein Weekly."

"I don't care who published it or where. I still say, 'bunk!' "

"Wasn't that the same word you used not so long ago when I tried to tell you about a certain Witch Doll?" teased Penny. "I started off on what looked like a foolish chase, but I came back dragging one of the best news stories the *Star* ever published. Remember?"

"No chance you'll ever let me forget!"

"Dad, I have a hunch," Penny went on, ignoring the jibe. "There's a big story in this Headless Horseman business! I just feel it."

"I suppose you'd like to have me assign you the task of tracking down your Front Page gem?"

"Now you're talking my language!"

"Penny, can't you see it's only a joke?" Mr. Parker asked in exasperation. "The Headless Horseman of

Sleepy Hollow! That story was written years ago by a man named Washington Irving. Or didn't you know?"

"Oh, I've read the 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow,'" Penny retorted loftily. "I remember one of the characters was Ichabod Crane. He was chased by the Headless Horseman and nearly died of fright."

"A nice bit of fiction," commented Mr. Parker. He tapped the newspaper clipping. "And so is this. The best place for it is in the scrap basket."

"Oh, no, it isn't!" Penny leaped forward to rescue the precious clipping. Carefully she folded it into her purse. "Dad, I'm convinced Sleepy Hollow must be a real place. Why can't I go there to interview Mr. Burmaster?"

"Did you say Burmaster?"

"Yes, the person who offers the reward. He signed himself J. Burmaster."

"That name is rather familiar," Mr. Parker said thoughtfully. "Wonder if it could be John Burmaster, the millionaire? Probably not. But I recall that a man by that name built an estate called Sleepy Hollow somewhere in the hill country."

"There!" cried Penny triumphantly. "You see the story does have substance after all! May I make the trip?"

"How would you find Burmaster?"

"A big estate shouldn't be hard to locate. I can

trace him through the Hobostein Weekly. What do you say, Dad?"

"The matter is for Mrs. Weems to decide. Now scram out of here! I have work to do."

"Thanks for letting me go," laughed Penny, giving him a big hug. "Now about finances—but we'll discuss that angle later."

Blowing her father an airy kiss, she pranced out of the office.

Penny fairly trod on clouds as she raced toward the home of her chum, Louise Sidell. Her dark-haired chum sat listlessly on the porch reading a book, but she jumped to her feet as she saw her friend. From the way Penny took the steps at one leap she knew there was important news to divulge.

"What's up?" she demanded alertly.

"Hop, skip and count three!" laughed Penny. "We're about to launch forth into a grand and glorious adventure. How would you like to go in search of a Headless Horseman?"

"Any kind of a creature suits me," chuckled Louise. "When do we start and where?"

"Lead me to a map and I'll try to answer your questions. Our first problem is to find a place called Red Valley."

For a half hour the two girls poured over a state map. Hobostein County was an area close by, while Red Valley proved to be an isolated little locality less

than a day's journey from Riverview. Penny was further encouraged to learn that the valley she proposed to visit had been settled by Dutch pioneers and that many of the original families still had descendants living there.

"It will be an interesting trip even if we don't run into any mystery," Louise said philosophically. "Are you sure you can go, Penny?"

"Well, pretty sure. Dad said it was up to Mrs. Weems to decide."

Louise gave her chum a sideways glance. "That seems like a mighty big 'if' to me."

"Oh, I'll bring her around somehow. Pack your suitcase, Lou. We'll start tomorrow morning bright and early."

Though Penny spoke with confidence, she was less certain of her powers as she entered her own home a few minutes later. She found Mrs. Weems, the stout, middle-aged housekeeper in the kitchen making cookies.

"Now please don't gobble any of that raw dough!" Mrs. Weems remonstrated as the girl reached for one of the freshly cut circles. "Can't you wait until they're baked?"

Penny perched herself on the sink counter. Reminded that her heels were making marks on the cabinet door, she drew them up beneath her and balanced like an acrobat. Forthwith she launched into a glow-

ing tale of her morning's activities. The story failed to bring a responsive warmth from the housekeeper.

"I declare, I can't make sense out of what you're saying!" she protested. "Headless Horsemen, my word! I'm afraid you're the one who's lost your head. The ideas you do get!"

Mrs. Weems sadly heaved a deep sigh. Since the death of Mrs. Parker many years before, she had assumed complete charge of the household. However, the task of raising Penny had been almost too much for the patient woman. Though she loved the girl as her own, there were times when she felt that running a three-ring circus would be much easier.

"Louise and I plan to start for Red Valley by train early tomorrow," said Penny briskly. "We'll probably catch the 9:25 if I can get up in time."

"And has your father said you may go?"

"He said it was up to you."

Mrs. Weems smiled grimly. "Then the matter is settled. I shall put my foot down."

"Oh, Mrs. Weems," Penny wailed. "Please don't ruin all our plans. The trip means so much to me!"

"I've heard that argument before," replied Mrs. Weems, unmoved. "I see no reason why I should allow you to start off on such a wild chase."

"But I expect to get a dandy story for Dad's paper!"

"That's only an excuse," sighed the housekeeper. "The truth is that you crave adventure and excite-

ment. It's a trait which unfortunately you inherited from your father."

Penny decided to play her trump card.

"Mrs. Weems, Red Valley is one of those picturesque hidden localities where families have gone on for generation after generation. The place must fairly swim with antiques. Wouldn't you like to have me buy a few for you while I'm there?"

Despite her intentions, Mrs. Weems displayed interest. As Penny very well knew, collecting antiques had become an absorbing hobby with her.

"Silas Malcom has a spinning wheel for sale," Penny went on, pressing home the advantage she had gained. "I'll find him if I can and buy it for you."

"Your schemes are as transparent as glass."

"But you will let me go?"

"I probably will," sighed Mrs. Weems. "I've learned to my sorrow that in any event you usually get your way."

Penny danced out of the kitchen to a telephone.

"It's all set," she gleefully told Louise. "We leave early tomorrow morning for Red Valley. And if I don't earn that five hundred dollar reward then my name isn't Penny Gumshoe Parker!"

CHAPTER

3

INTO THE VALLEY

THE SLOW train crept around a bend and puffed to a standstill at the drowsing little station of Hobostein. Louise and Penny, their linen suits mussed from many weary hours of sitting, were the only passengers to alight.

"Yesterday it seemed like a good idea," sighed Louise. "But now, I'm not so sure."

Penny stepped aside to avoid a dolly-truck which was being pushed down the deserted platform by a station attendant. She too felt ill at ease in this strange town and the task she had set for herself suddenly seemed a silly one. But not for anything in the world would she make such an admission.

"First we'll find the newspaper office," she said briskly. "This town is so small it can't be far away."

They carried their over-night bags into the stuffy little station. The agent, in shirt sleeves and green eye shade, speared a train order on the spindle and then glanced curiously at the girls.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," replied Penny. "Please tell us how to find the offices of the Hobostein Weekly."

"It's just a piece down the street," directed the agent. "Go past the old town pump, and the livery stable. A red brick building. Best one in town. You can't miss it."

Penny and Louise took their bags and crossed to the shady side of the street. A horse and carriage had been tied to a hitching post and by contrast an expensive, new automobile was parked beside it. The unpaved road was thick with dust; the broken sidewalk was coated with it, as were the little plots of struggling grass.

In the entire town few persons were abroad. An old lady in a sunbonnet busily loaded boxes of groceries into a farm wagon. The only other sign of activity was at the livery stable where a group of men slouched on the street benches.

"Must we pass there?" Louise murmured. "Those men are staring as if they never saw a girl before."

"Let them," said Penny, undisturbed.

Two doors beyond the livery stable stood a newly built red brick building. In gold paint on the expanse of unwashed plate glass window were the words: "Hobostein Weekly."

With heads high the girls ran the gantlet of loungers and reached the newspaper office. Through the

plate glass they glimpsed a large, cluttered room where desks, bins of type, table forms and a massive flat-bed press all seemed jammed together. A rotund man they took to be the editor was talking to a customer in a loud voice. Neither took the slightest notice of the girls as they pushed open the door.

"I don't care who you are or how much money you have," the editor was saying heatedly. "I run my paper as I please—see! If you don't like my editorials you don't have to read them."

"You're a pin-headed, stubborn Dutchman!" the other man retorted. "It makes no difference to me what you run in your stupid old weekly, providing you don't deliberately try to stir up the people of this valley."

"Worrying about your pocketbook?"

"I'm the largest tax payer in the valley. If there's an assessment for repairs on the Huntley Lake Dam it will cost me thousands of dollars."

"And if you had an ounce of sense, you'd see that without the repairs your property may not be worth a nickel! If these rains keep up, the dam's apt to give way, and your property would go in the twinkling of an eye. Not that I'm worried about your property. But I am concerned about the folks who are still living in the valley."

"Schultz, you're a calamity-howler!" the other accused. "There's no danger of the dam giving way

and you know it. By writing these hot editorials you're just trying to stir up public feeling—you're hoping to shake me down so I'll underwrite a costly and unnecessary repair bill."

The editor pushed back his chair and arose. His voice remained controlled but his eyes snapped like fire brands.

"Get out of this office!" he ordered. "The Hobostein Weekly can do without your subscription. You've been a pain to this community ever since you came. Good afternoon!"

"You can't talk like that to me, Byron Schultz!" the other man began hotly. Then his gaze fell upon Louise and Penny who stood just inside the door. Jamming on his hat, he went angrily from the building.

The editor crumpled a sheet of paper and hurled it into a waste basket. The act seemed to restore his good humor, for with a wry grin he then turned toward the girls.

"Yes?" he inquired.

Penny scarcely knew how to begin. Sliding into a chair beside the editor's desk, she fumbled in her purse for the advertisement clipped from the Hobostein Weekly. To her confusion she could not find it.

"Lose something?" the editor inquired kindly. "That's my trouble too. Last week we misplaced the copy for Gregg's Grocery Store and was Jake hoppin'

mad! Found it again just before the Weekly went to press."

"Here it is!" said Penny triumphantly. She placed the clipping on Mr. Schultz' desk.

"Haven't I had enough of that man in one day!" the editor snorted. "The old skinflint never paid me for the ad either!"

"Who is J. Burmaster?" Penny inquired eagerly.

"Who is he?" The editor's gray-blue eyes sent out little flashes of fire. "He's the most egotistical, thick-headed, muddle-brained property owner in this community."

"Not the man who was just here?"

"Yes, that was John Burmaster."

"Then he lives in Hobostein?"

"He does not," said the editor with emphasis. "It's bad enough having him seven miles away. You don't mean to tell me you haven't seen Sleepy Hollow estate?"

Penny shook her head. She explained that as strangers to the town, she and Louise had made no trips or inquiries.

"Sleepy Hollow is quite a show place," the editor went on grudgingly. "Old Burmaster built it about a year ago. Imported an architect and workmen from the city. The house has a long bridge leading up to it, and is supposed to be like the Sleepy Hollow of legend. Only the legend kinda backfired."

"You're speaking about the Headless Horseman?" Penny leaned forward in her chair.

"When Burmaster built his house, the old skinflint didn't calculate on getting a haunt to go with it," the editor chuckled. "Served him right for being so muleish."

"But what is the story of the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked. "Has Mr. Burmaster actually offered a five hundred dollar reward for its capture?"

"He'd give double the amount to get that Horseman off his neck!" chuckled the editor. "But folks up Delta way aren't so dumb. The reward never will be collected."

"Is Delta the name of a town?"

"Yes, it's up the valley a piece," explained Mr. Schultz. "You don't seem very familiar with our layout here."

"No, my friend and I come from Riverview."

"Well, you see, it's like this." The editor drew a crude map for the girls. "Sleepy Hollow estate is situated in a sort of 'V' shaped valley. Just below it is the little town of Delta, and on below that, a hamlet called Raven. We're at the foot of the valley, so to speak. Huntley Lake and the dam are just above Sleepy Hollow estate."

"And is there really danger that the dam will give way?"

"If you want my opinion, read the Hobostein

Weekly," answered the editor. "The dam won't wash out tomorrow or the next day, but if these rains keep on, the whole valley's in danger. But try to pound any sense into Burmaster's thick head!"

"You started to tell me about the Headless Horseman," Penny reminded him.

"Did I now?" smiled the editor. "Don't recollect it myself. Fact is, Burmaster's ghost troubles don't interest me one whit."

"But we've come all the way from Riverview just to find out about the Headless Horseman."

"Calculate on earning that reward?" The editor's eyes twinkled.

"Perhaps."

"Then you don't want to waste time trying to get second-hand information. Burmaster's the man for you to see. Talk to him."

"Well—"

"No, you talk to Burmaster," the editor said with finality. "Only don't tell him I sent you."

"But how will we find the man?" Penny was rather dismayed to have the interview end before it was well launched.

"Oh, his car is parked down the street," the editor answered carelessly. "Everyone in town knows Burmaster. I'd talk to you longer only I'm so busy this afternoon. Burmaster is the one to tell you his own troubles."

Thus dismissed, the girls could do nothing but thank the editor and leave the newspaper building. Dubiously they looked up and down the street. The fine new car they had noticed a little while earlier no longer was parked at the curb. Nor was there any sign of the man who had just left the newspaper office.

"All we can do is inquire for him," said Penny.

At a grocery store farther down the street they paused to ask if Mr. Burmaster had been seen. The store keeper finished grinding a pound of coffee for a customer and then answered Penny's question.

"Mr. Burmaster?" he repeated. "Why, yes, he was in town, but he pulled out about five minutes ago."

"Then we've just missed him!" Penny exclaimed.

"Burmaster's on his way to Sleepy Hollow by this time," the store keeper agreed. "You might catch him there."

"But how can we get to Sleepy Hollow?"

"Well, there's a train. Only runs once a day though. And it went through about half an hour ago."

"That was the train we came in on. Isn't there a car one can hire?"

"Don't know of any. Clem Williams has some good horses though. He keeps the livery stable down the street."

Their faces very long, the girls picked up their overnight bags and went outside again.

"I knew this trip would be a wash-out," said Louise disconsolately. "Here we are, stuck high and dry until our train comes in tomorrow."

"But why give up so easily?"

"We're licked, that's why. We've missed Mr. Burmaster and we can't go to Sleepy Hollow after him."

Penny gazed thoughtfully down the street at Clem Williams' livery stable.

"Why can't we go to Sleepy Hollow?" she demanded. "Let's rent horses."

Louise waxed sarcastic. "To be sure. We can canter along balancing these overnight bags on the pommel of our saddles!"

"We'll have to leave our luggage behind," Penny planned briskly. "The most essential things we can wrap up in knapsacks."

"But I'm not a good rider," Louise complained. "The last time we rode a mile I couldn't walk for a week."

"Seven miles isn't so far."

"Seven miles!" Louise gasped. "Why, it's slaughter."

"Oh, you'll last," chuckled Penny confidently. "I'll see to that."

"I am curious to see Sleepy Hollow estate," Louise

admitted with reluctance. "All that talk about the Huntley Dam interested me too."

"And the Headless Horseman?"

"That part rather worries me. Penny, do you realize that if we go to Sleepy Hollow we may run into more than we bargain for?"

Penny laughed and grasping her chums arm, pulled her down the street.

"That's what I hope," she confessed. "Unless Sleepy Hollow lets us down shamefully, our adventure is just starting!"

CHAPTER

4

A STRANGER OF THE ROAD

EVEN FOR late September it was a warm day. The horses plodded slowly up a steep, winding trail heavily canopied with yellowing maple leaves. Louise and Penny swished angrily at the buzzing mosquitoes and tried to urge their tired mounts to a faster pace.

"I warned you this trip would be slaughter," Louise complained, ducking to avoid a tree limb. "Furthermore, I suspect we're lost."

"How could we be when we haven't turned off the trail?" Penny called over her shoulder.

She rode ahead on a sorry looking nag appropriately named Bones. The animal was more easily managed than the skittish mare Louise had chosen at Williams' Livery Stable, but had an annoying appetite for foliage.

"Mr. Williams' directions were clear enough," Penny resumed. "He said to follow this trail until we reach a little town named Delta."

"Providing we survive that long," Louise inter-

posed crossly. "How far from Delta to Sleepy Hollow?"

"Not more than two or three miles. And once we get down out of these hills into the valley, the going should be much easier."

Penny spoke with forced cheerfulness. In truth, she too had wearied of the trip which in the last hour had become sheer torture instead of adventure. Her freckled face was blotched with mosquito bites. Every hairpin had been jolted from her head and muscles fairly screamed a protest. Louise, on an unruly horse, had taken even more punishment.

Penny gave Bones a dig in the ribs. The horse quickened his step, weaving a corkscrew path around the trunks of the giant trees.

Gradually the tangle of brush and trees began to thin out. They came at last to a clearing at the brow of the hill. Penny drew rein beside a huge, moss-covered rock. Below stretched a beautiful rich, green valley through which wound a flood-swollen river. From the chimney-tops of a cluster of houses smoke curled lazily, blending into the blue rim of the distant hills.

"Did you ever see a prettier little valley?" Penny asked, her interest reviving. "That must be Delta down there."

Louise was too weary to look or answer. She slid out of the saddle and tossed the reins over a tree limb.

Near by a spring gushed from between the rocks. She walked stiffly to it and drank deeply of the cool water.

"Lou, the valley looks exactly as I hoped it would!" Penny went on eagerly. "It has a dreamy, drowsy atmosphere, just as Irving described the Sleepy Hollow of legend!"

Louise bent to drink of the spring again. She sponged her hot face with a dampened handkerchief. Pulling off shoes and stockings, she let the cool water trickle over her bare feet.

"According to legend, the valley and its inhabitants were bewitched," Penny rambled on. "Why, the Indians considered these hills as the abode of Spirits. Sometimes the Spirits took mischievous delight in wreaking trouble upon the villagers—"

Penny's voice trailed off. From far down the hillside came the faint thud of hoofbeats. The girl's attention became fixed upon a moving horseman on the road below.

"Now what?" inquired Louise impatiently. "Don't try to tell me you've seen the Headless Horseman already?"

"I've certainly seen a horseman! My, can that fellow ride!"

Louise picked up her shoes and hobbled over the stones to the trail's end. Through a gap in the trees she gazed down upon a winding turnpike fringed on

either side with an old-fashioned rail fence. A horseman, mounted on a roan mare, rode bareback at a full run. As the girls watched in admiration, the mare took the low fence in one magnificent leap and crashed out of sight through the trees.

"You're right, Penny," Louise acknowledged. "What wouldn't I give to be able to ride like that! One of the villagers, I suppose."

The hoofbeats rapidly died away. Louise turned wearily around, intending to remount her horse. She stared in astonishment. Where the mare had grazed, there now was only trampled grass.

"Where's my horse?" she demanded. "Where's White Foot?"

"Spirited away by the witches maybe."

"This is no time for any of your feeble jokes, Penny Parker! That stupid horse must have wandered off while I was admiring your old valley and that rider!"

Penny remained undisturbed. "Oh, we'll find the mare all right," she said confidently. "She can't be far away."

The girls thought that they heard a crashing of underbrush to the left of the trail. Investigation did not disclose that the horse had gone that way. They could hear no hoofbeats, nor was any of the grass trampled.

"I'll bet White Foot's on her way back to Williams' Stable by this time," Louise declared crossly. "Such

luck!" She sat down on a stone and put on her shoes and stockings.

"We didn't hear the horse run off, Lou. She can't be far."

"Then you find her. I've had all I can stand. I'm tired and I'm hungry and I wish I'd never come on this wild, silly chase." Tears began to trickle down Louise's heat-mottled face.

Penny slid down from Bones and patted her chum's arm awkwardly. Louise pulled away from her.

"Now don't give me any pep talk or I'll simply bawl," she warned. "What am I going to do without a horse?"

"Why, that's easy, Lou. We'll ride double."

"Back to Williams' Stable?"

"Well, not tonight. It's getting late and after coming this far it would be foolish to turn around and start right back."

"It would be the most sensible act of our lives," Louise retorted. "But then I might know you'd insist on pushing on. You and Christopher Columbus have a lot in common!"

"We came to find out about that Headless Horseman, didn't we?"

"You did, I guess," Louise sighed, getting up from the rock. "I just came along because I'm weak minded! Well, what's the plan?"

"Let's ride down to Delta and try to get a room for the night."

Louise's silence gave consent. She climbed up behind Penny on Bones and they jogged down the trail toward the turnpike.

"It's queer how White Foot sneaked away without making a sound," Penny presently commented. "According to the old legend strange things did happen in the Sleepy Hollow valley. The Spirit was supposed to wreak all sorts of vexations upon the inhabitants. Sometimes he would take the shape of a bear or a deer and lead bewildered hunters a merry chase through the woods."

"You're the one who is bewitched," Louise broke in. "And if you ask me, you've been that way ever since you were born. There's a little spark—something deep within you that keeps saying: 'Go on, Penny. Sic 'em, Penny! Maybe you'll find a mystery!"

"Perhaps I shall too!"

"Oh, I don't doubt that. You've turned up some dandy news stories for your father's paper. But this is different."

"How so?"

"In the first place we both know there's no such thing as a Headless Horseman. It must all be a joke."

"Would you call that advertisement in the Hobostein paper a joke?"

"It could have been. We don't know many of the facts."

"That's why we're here." Penny guided Bones onto the wide turnpike. Before she could add more, Louise's grasp about her waist suddenly tightened.

"Listen, Penny! Someone's coming!"

Penny drew rein. Distinctly, both girls could hear the clop-clop of approaching hoofbeats. Their hope that it might be White Foot was quickly dashed. A moment later the same horseman they had observed a few minutes earlier, swung around the bend.

The young man rapidly overtook the girls. From the way he grinned, they suspected that they presented a ridiculous sight as they rocked along on Bones' swaying back. He sat his own horse, a handsome roan, with easy grace.

Louise tugged at her skirt which kept creeping above her knees. "He's laughing at us!" she muttered under her breath.

The rider cantered up, then deliberately slowed his horse to a walk. Louise stole a quick sideways glance. The young man was dark-haired, about twenty-six and very good looking. His flashing brown eyes were friendly and so was his voice as he spoke a cheery, " 'Lo, girls."

"Hello," Penny responded briefly. Louise immediately nudged her in the ribs, a silent warning that she considered the stranger "fresh."

Nevertheless, Penny twisted sideways in the saddle the better to look at their road companion. He wore whipcord riding breeches and highly polished boots. From the well-tailored cut of his clothes she decided that he too was a comparative stranger to the hill country.

"Not looking for a horse by any chance, are you?" the young man inquired.

Louise's snub nose came down out of the sky. "Oh, we are!" she cried. "Where did you see her?"

"A mare with a white foot? Her left hind one?"

"Yes, that's White Foot!" Louise exclaimed joyfully. "The stupid creature wandered off."

"Saw her making for the valley about five minutes ago. Like enough she turned in at Silas Malcom's place."

The name took Penny by surprise. Although she had hoped to find the old man who had visited the *Star* office, she had not thought it possible without a long search.

"Does Mr. Malcom live near here?" she inquired.

"Yes, his farm's on down the pike. Want me to ride along and show you the way?"

Under the circumstance, Penny and Louise had no choice but to accept the offer. However, they both thought that the young man merely was making an excuse to accompany them. He seemed to read their minds for he said:

"I didn't actually see your missing horse turn in at the Malcom place. Know why I think she'll be there?"

"Perhaps you have supernatural powers," Penny said lightly. "From what we hear, this valley is quite a place for witches and Headless Horsemen."

The young man gave her an amused glance.

"The explanation is quite simple," he laughed. "Silas used to own that horse. All horses have a strong homing instinct, you know."

"I've noticed that," Louise contributed a bit grimly.

"Guess I should introduce myself," the young man resumed. "Name's Joe Quigley. I'm the station agent at Delta."

"We're glad to meet you," Penny responded. Though Louise scowled at her, she gave their own names. She added that they had come to the valley seeking information about the mysterious Headless Horseman.

"Friends of Mr. Burmaster?" Quigley inquired casually.

"Oh, no," Penny assured him. "We just came for the fun of it. Is it true that some prankster has been causing trouble in the valley?"

"Prankster?"

"Yes, someone fixed up to resemble the Headless Horseman of fable."

Quigley grinned broadly. "Well, now, you

couldn't prove it by me. Some folks say that on certain foggy nights the old Galloping Hessian does ride down out of the hills. But then there are folks who claim their butter won't churn because it's been bewitched. I never put much stock in such talk myself."

"Then you've never actually seen such a rider?"

Joe Quigley remained silent. After a thoughtful interval he admitted: "Well, one night over a month ago, I did see something strange."

"What was it?" Louise asked quickly.

Quigley pointed far up the hillside. "See that big boulder? Witching Rock it's called."

Penny nodded. "We were there only a few minutes ago."

"At night fog rises up from the valley and gives the place a spooky look. Years ago a tramp was killed there. No one ever did learn the how or why of it."

"What was it you saw?" Penny inquired.

"Can't rightly say," Quigley returned soberly. "I was on this same turnpike when I chanced to glance up toward that big rock. I saw something there in the mist and then the next minute it was gone."

"Not the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked.

"Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. I'd have thought I imagined it only I heard clattering hoofbeats. But I can tell you one thing about this valley."

"What's that?" asked Louise.

"All the inhabitants are said to be bewitched! That's why I act so crazy myself."

Penny tossed her head. "Oh, you're just laughing at us," she accused. "I suppose it does sound silly to say we came here searching for a Headless Horseman."

"No, it's not in the least silly," Quigley corrected. "I might pay you a compliment by saying you impress me as very courageous young ladies. May I offer a word of advice?"

"Thank you, I don't think we care for it."

"Nevertheless, I aim to give it anyway." Quigley grinned down at Penny. "You see, I know who you are. You're Anthony Parker's daughter, and you've built up a reputation for solving mysteries."

Penny was astonished for she had not mentioned her father's name.

"Never mind how I knew," said Quigley, forestalling questions. "Here's my tip. No one ever will collect Burmaster's reward offer. So don't waste time and energy trailing a phantom."

"Why do you say the reward never will be collected?"

Quigley would not answer. With a provoking shake of his head, he pointed down the pike to an unpainted cabin and a huge new barn.

"That's the Malcom place," he said. "If I'm not

mistaken your missing horse is grazing by the gate. Goodbye and good luck."

With a friendly, half-mocking salute, he wheeled his mount. The next instant horse and rider had crashed through a gap in the roadside brush and were lost to view.

CHAPTER

5

SLEEPY HOLLOW ESTATE

"I'M AFRAID that young man was having fun at our expense," Penny remarked after horse and rider had gone. "How do you suppose he knew about my father?"

"Read it in a newspaper probably. You've both made the headlines often enough." Louise sighed wearily and shifted positions. "I certainly wish we never had come here."

"Well, I don't," Penny said with emphasis. She clucked to Bones and when he failed to move smartly along, gave him a quick jab with her heels. "If Joe Quigley won't tell us about that galloping ghost, perhaps Mr. Malcom will."

"I'll settle for my missing horse," Louise responded.

The girls jogged on down the road toward the Malcom cabin. Already the hills were casting long blue shadows over the valley floor. With night fast ap-

proaching Penny began to wonder where they could seek lodging.

"You don't catch me staying at the Malcom place," Louise said, reading her chum's thought. "It's too ramshackle."

Drawing nearer the cabin, both girls were elated to see White Foot grazing contentedly in a stony field adjoining the Malcom barn yard. At the gate Penny alighted nimbly and threw it open so that Louise could ride through.

The creaking of the rusty hinges brought Silas Malcom from the tumble-down house. He stared blankly for a moment and then recognized Penny.

"Well, bless my heart," he said. "If it ain't the young lady that helped me at the newspaper office!"

"And now it's your turn to help us," laughed Penny. "We've lost our horse."

"I knowed somebody would be along for her purty soon," the old man chuckled. "She run into the barn yard 'bout ten minutes ago an' I turned her out to graze. I'll git her for you."

If Mr. Malcom was surprised to see Penny so far from Riverview he did not disclose it. He asked no questions. Hobbling to the fence, he whistled a shrill blast. White Foot pricked up her ears and then came trotting over to nuzzle the old man's hand.

"You certainly have that horse under control," said

Penny admiringly. "I guess it's all in the way you handle 'em."

"It's also all in the way you handle a Flying Fortress or a stick of dynamite," Louise cut in. "You may have my share of horses!"

"White Foot didn't throw you off?" Mr. Malcom inquired.

"Oh, no," Louise assured him, and explained how the horse had run away.

Old Silas chuckled appreciatively. "White Foot always did have a habit o' sneakin' off like that. Raised her from a colt, but sold her to Williams down in Hobostein when I got short o' cash."

Wrapping the reins about a hitching post, the old man allowed his gaze to wander toward the valley. With a gesture that was hard to interpret, he indicated the long stretch of fertile pasture land, golden grain fields and orderly rows of young orchard trees.

"See that!" he commanded.

"It's a beautiful valley," Louise murmured politely.

"It's mor'n that," corrected the old man. "You're lookin' at one o' the richest parcels o' land in this here state. Me and the old woman lived down there fer goin' on twenty years. Then we was put out o' our cabin. Now that penny-pinchin' Burmaster owns every acre fer as you can see—not countin' the village o' Delta an' three acres held fer spite by the Widder Lear."

Old Silas took a chew of tobacco and pointed to a trim little log cabin visible through a gap in the trees.

"Stands out like a sore thumb, don't it? Burmaster's done everything he can to git rid o' that place, but the Widder Lear jes' sits tight an' won't have no dealings with him. Says that if the old skinflint comes round her place again she's goin' to drive him off with a shotgun."

Penny and Louise waited, hoping that the old man would tell more. After a little silence, he resumed meditatively:

"The Widder was the smartest o' the lot of us. From the first she said Burmaster was out to gobble up all the best land for hisself. Nobody could get her to sign no papers. That's why she's got her little place today and the rest of us is tryin' to make a livin' out o' these stone patches."

"Burmaster forced all of the valley folk off their land?" Penny inquired, perplexed. "How could he do that?"

"Some of 'em sold out to him," Old Silas admitted. "But mostly the land was owned by a rich feller in Boston. He never paid no attention to his holdings 'cept to collect a bit o' rent now and then. But last spring he up and sold out to Burmaster, and we was all told to git off the land."

Penny nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that was entirely legal. If Mr. Burmaster bought and paid for

the land one couldn't accuse him of dishonest dealings."

"I ain't accusin' nobody o' nothin'," Old Silas replied. "I'm jes' tellin' you how things are in this here valley. Ye came to find out about that Headless Horseman, didn't ye?"

"Well, yes, we did," Penny acknowledged.

"Figured you would. You'll never win that reward Burmaster's offerin', but you could do a heap o' good in this here valley."

"How?" asked Penny, even more puzzled.

"You got a pa that runs a big city newspaper. When he prints an editorial piece in that paper o' his, folks read it and pay attention."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will after you been here awhile," the old man chuckled. "Where you gals calculatin' to spend the night?"

"I wish we knew."

"Me and the ole woman'd be glad to take you in, only we ain't got no room fitten for city-raised gals. The Widder Lear'll be glad to give you bed and fodder."

The girls thanked Mr. Malcom, though secretly they were sure they would keep on until they reached Delta. A suspicion was growing in Penny's mind that she had not come to the valley of her own free will. Rather she had been lured there by Old Silas' Head-

less Horseman tale. She had assumed the old fellow to be a simple, trusting hillman, while in truth he meant to make use of her.

"Calculate you're anxious-like to git down to the valley 'fore night sets on," the old man resumed. "The turnpike's no fitten place for a gal after dark."

"You think we might meet the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked, smiling.

Old Silas deliberately allowed the question to pass.

"Jes' follow the turnpike," he instructed. "You'll come fust to the Burmaster place. Then on beyond is the Widder Lear's cabin. She'll treat you right."

Penny had intended to ask Old Silas if he still had a spinning wheel for sale. However, a glimpse of the darkening sky warned her there was no time to waste. She and Louise must hasten on unless they expected to be overtaken by night.

"Goodbye," Penny said, vaulting into the saddle. "We'll probably see you again before we leave the valley."

"Calculate you will," agreed Old Silas. As he opened the gate for the girls he smiled in a way they could not fathom.

Once more on the curving turnpike, Penny and Louise discussed the old man's strange words. Both were agreed that Silas had not been in the least surprised to see them.

"But why did he say I could do good in the valley?"

Penny speculated. "Evidently he thinks I'll influence my father to write something in the *Star*."

"Against Burmaster perhaps," nodded Louise. "Everyone we've met seems to dislike that man."

The girls clattered over a little log bridge and rounded a bend. Giant trees arched their limbs over the pike, creating a dark, cool tunnel. Penny and Louise urged their tired horses to a faster pace. Though neither would have admitted it, they had no desire to be on the turnpike after nightfall.

"Listen!" Louise commanded suddenly. "What was that sound?"

Penny drew rein to listen. Only a chirp of a cricket disturbed the eerie stillness.

"Just for a minute I thought I heard hoofbeats," Louise said apologetically. "Guess I must have imagined it."

Emerging from the long avenue of trees, the girls were slightly dismayed to see how swiftly darkness had spread its cloak on the valley. Beyond the next turn of the corkscrew road stood a giant tulip tree. Riding beneath it, Penny stared up at the gnarled limbs which were twisted in fantastic shapes.

"There was an old tulip tree in the Legend of Sleepy Hollow," she murmured in awe. "And it was close by that the Headless Horseman appeared—"

"Will you please hush?" Louise interrupted. "I'm jittery enough without any build-up from you!"

Some distance ahead stretched a long, narrow

bridge with a high wooden railing. By straining their eyes the girls could see that it crossed a mill pond and led in a graceful curve to a rambling manor house of clapboard and stone.

"Mr. Burmaster's estate!" Louise exclaimed.

"And it looks exactly as I imagined it would!" Penny added in delight. "A perfect setting for the Galloping Hessian!"

"Too spooky if you ask me," said Louise with a shiver. "Why would anyone build an expensive home in such a lonely place?"

The girls rode on. A group of oaks, heavily matted with wild grapevines, threw a deeper gloom over the road. For a short distance the dense growth of trees hid the estate from view.

Suddenly the girls were startled to hear the sharp, ringing clop-clop of steel-shod hoofs. Unmistakably, the sound came from the direction of the long, narrow bridge.

"There! I knew I heard hoofbeats a moment ago!" Louise whispered nervously. "Maybe it *is* the Headless Horseman!"

"Be your age!" chided Penny. "We both know there's no such thing—"

The words died on her lips. From somewhere in the darkness ahead came a woman's terrified scream. Frightened by the sound, Bones gave a startled snort. With a jerk which nearly flung Penny from the saddle, he plunged on toward the bridge.

CHAPTER

6

GHOSTS AND WITCHES

HIS EARS laid back, Bones plunged headlong toward the gloom-shrouded bridge. Pins shook from Penny's head, and her hair became a stream of gold in the wind. She hunched low in the saddle, but could not stop the horse though she pulled hard on the reins.

As she reached a dense growth of elder bushes, a man leaped out to grasp the bridle. Bones snorted angrily and pounded the earth with his hoofs.

"Oh, thank you!" Penny gasped, and then she realized that the man had not meant to help her.

"So you're the one who's been causing so much trouble here!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Get down out of that saddle!"

"I'll do no such thing!" Penny retorted. She tried to push him away.

Louise came trotting up on White Foot. Her unexpected arrival seemed to disconcert the man for he released Bones' bridle.

"What's he trying to do?" Louise demanded sharply, pulling up beside her chum.

Before Penny could find tongue, another man, heavily built, came running across the narrow bridge. His bald head bore no covering and the long tails of his well-cut coat flapped wildly in the wind.

"You let that rider get away, Jennings!" he cried accusingly to the workman. "Did you see him ride across the bridge and then take a trail along the creek bed?"

"No, I didn't, Mr. Burmaster," the workman mumbled. "I heard hoofbeats and came as fast as I could from the grist mill. The only rider I saw was this girl. There's two of 'em."

"We have a perfect right to be here," Penny declared. "We were riding along the pike when we heard hoofbeats, then a scream. My horse became frightened and plunged down this way toward the bridge."

"I'm sorry I grabbed the bridle, Miss," the workman apologized. "You see, I thought—"

"Your trouble, Jennings, is that you never think!" cut in the owner of Sleepy Hollow curtly. "You never even saw the rider who got away?"

"No, sir. But I'll get the other workmen and go after him."

"Don't waste your efforts. He was only a boy—not the man we're after."

"Only a boy, sir?"

"The scamp clattered a stick against the railing of the bridge just to frighten my wife. Mrs. Burmaster is a very nervous woman."

"Yes, sir," replied the workman rather emphatically. "I know, sir."

"Oh, you do?" Mr. Burmaster asked, his tone unfriendly. "Well, get to the house and tell her there's no cause to scream to high heaven. The boy, whoever he was, is gone."

"I'll tell her," the workman mumbled, starting away.

"And mind, next time I order you to watch this road, I mean watch it!" the estate owner called after him. "If you don't, I'll find another man to take your place."

As Mr. Burmaster turned toward the girls, they obtained a better view of his face. He wore glasses and his cheeks were pouchy; a hooked nose curved down toward a mouth that was hard and firm. Yet when he spoke it was with a surprisingly pleasant tone of voice.

"I must apologize for the stupid actions of my workman," he said to Penny. "He should have known that you were not the one we are after."

"Not the Headless Horseman?" Penny asked, half jokingly.

Mr. Burmaster stepped closer so that he could gaze up into the girl's face. He scrutinized it for a moment, and then without answering her question said: "You are a stranger to the valley."

"Yes, we are."

"Then may I ask how you knew about our difficulties here at Sleepy Hollow?"

Penny explained that she had seen the estate owner's advertisement in the *Hobostein Weekly*. She did not add that it was the real reason why she and Louise had made the long trip from Riverview.

"I'll be willing to pay any amount to be rid of that so-called ghost who annoys us here at Sleepy Hollow," Mr. Burmaster said bitterly. "Night after night my wife has had no rest. The slightest sound terrifies her."

"Tell us more about the mysterious rider," Penny urged. "What time does he appear?"

"Oh, there's no predicting that. Often he rides over the bridge on stormy or foggy nights. Then again it's apt to be just after dusk. Tonight we thought we had the scamp, but it proved to be only a mischievous boy."

"Your workmen stand guard?"

"They have orders to watch this bridge day and night. But the men are a lazy lot. They wander off or they go to sleep."

"Isn't it possible that the disturbance always has been caused by a boy—perhaps this lad who clattered over the bridge tonight?"

"Impossible!" Mr. Burmaster snapped impatiently. "I've seen the Headless Horseman at least five times myself."

"You mean the rider actually has no head?" Louise interposed in awe.

"The appearance is that. Of course there's no question but someone from the village or the hills has been impersonating Irving's celebrated character of fiction. The point is, the joke's gone too far!"

"I should think so," Louise murmured sympathetically.

"My wife and I came to this little valley with only one thought. We wanted to build a fine home for ourselves amid peaceful surroundings. We brought in city workmen, a clever architect. No expense was spared to make this house and estate perfect. But when we tried to recreate the atmosphere of Sleepy Hollow, we didn't anticipate getting a ghost with it."

"When did the trouble first start?" Penny asked.

"Almost from the hour of our arrival. The country folks didn't like it because we imported city labor. They hindered our efforts. The women were abusive to my wife. Then last Halloween, the Headless Horseman clattered over this bridge."

"Couldn't it have been a holiday prank?"

"We thought so at first, but a month later, the same thing happened again. This time the scamp tossed a pebble against our bedroom window. Since then the rider has been coming at fairly frequent intervals."

"If you know it's a prank why should it worry you?" Penny inquired.

"A thing like that wears one down after awhile," the owner of the estate said wearily. "For myself I shouldn't mind, but my wife's going to pieces."

"Was it your wife we heard scream?" Louise asked, seeking to keep the conversational ball rolling.

"Yes, she's apt to go off the deep end whenever anyone rides fast over the bridge. My wife—"

Mr. Burmaster did not complete what he had intended to say. At that moment a soft padding of footsteps was heard, a creaking of boards on the bridge. From the direction of the house came a tall, shadowy figure.

"What were you saying about me, John?" The voice was that of a woman, shrill and strident.

"My wife," murmured the estate owner. He turned toward her. "Matilda," he said gently, "these girls are strangers to the Valley—"

"You were complaining about me to them!" the woman accused. "Oh, you needn't deny it! I distinctly heard you! You're always saying things to hurt my feelings. You don't care how I suffer. Isn't it enough that I have to live in this horrible com-

munity, among such cruel hateful people without you turning against me too?"

"Please, Matilda—"

"Don't 'Matilda' me! Apologize at once."

"Why, certainly I apologize," Mr. Burmaster said soothingly. "I was only telling the girls how nervous it makes you when anyone rides at a fast pace over the bridge."

"And why shouldn't I be nervous?" the woman demanded. "Since we've come to this community, I've been subjected to every possible insult! I suppose you let that rider get away again?"

"He was only a mischievous boy."

"I don't care who he was!" the woman cried. "I want him caught and turned over to the authorities. I want everyone who rides over this bridge arrested!"

"This is a public highway, Matilda. When we built this footbridge over the brook we had to grant permission for pedestrians and horseback riders to pass."

"Then make them change the ruling! Aren't you the richest man in the Valley? Or doesn't that mean anything?"

Mr. Burmaster glanced apologetically at Penny and Louise. The girls, quite taken aback by the woman's tirade, felt rather sorry for him. It was plain to see that Mrs. Burmaster was not a well woman. Her

sharp, angular face was drawn as if from constant worry, and she kept patting nervously at the stiff rolls of her hair.

"Well, I guess we'd better be moving on," Penny said significantly to Louise.

"Yes, we must," her companion agreed with alacrity. "Mr. Burmaster, is Mrs. Lear's place on down this road?"

The owner of Sleepy Hollow was given no opportunity to answer. Before he could speak, his wife stepped closer, glaring up at Louise in the saddle.

"So you're friends of Mrs. Lear?" she demanded mockingly. "I suppose that old hag sent you here to snoop and pry and annoy me!"

"Goodness, no!" gasped Louise.

"We've never even seen the woman," Penny added. "Silas Malcom told us that Mrs. Lear might give us a room for the night."

"Silas Malcom!" Mrs. Burmaster seized upon the name. "He's another who tries to make trouble for us!"

"If you're in need of a place to stay, we'll be glad to have you remain with us," Mr. Burmaster invited. "We have plenty of room."

Mrs. Burmaster remained silent, but in the semi-darkness, the girls saw her give her husband a quick nudge. No need to be told that they were unwel-

come by the eccentric mistress of Sleepy Hollow.

"Thank you, we couldn't possibly stay," Penny said, gathering up the reins.

She and Louise walked their horses single file over the creaking bridge. Just as they reached the far end Mr. Burmaster called to them. Pulling up, they waited for him.

"Please don't mind my wife," he said in an undertone. "She doesn't mean half what she says."

"We understand," Penny assured him kindly.

"You said you were interested in the Headless Horseman," the estate owner went on hurriedly. "Well, my offer holds. I'll pay a liberal reward to anyone who can learn the identity of the prankster. It's no boy. I'm sure of that."

Penny replied that she and Louise would like to help if they knew how.

"We'll talk about that part later on," Mr. Burmaster said. He glanced quickly over his shoulder, observing that his wife was coming. "No chance now. You'll stay with Mrs. Lear tonight?"

"If she'll take us in."

"Oh, she will, though her place is an eye-sore. Now this is what you might do. Get the old lady to talking. If she should give you the slightest hint who the prankster is, seize upon it."

"Then you think Mrs. Lear knows?"

"I suspect half the community does!" Mr. Burmas-

ter answered bitterly. "Everyone except ourselves. We're hated here. No one will cooperate with us."

Penny thought over the request. She did not like the idea of going to Mrs. Lear's home to spy.

"Well, we'll see," she answered, without making a definite promise.

Mrs. Burmaster was coming across the bridge. Not wishing to talk to her, the girls bade the owner of Sleepy Hollow a hasty farewell and rode away. Once on the turnpike, they discussed the queer mistress of the estate.

"If you ask me, everyone in this community is queer," Louise grumbled. "Mrs. Burmaster just seems a bit more so than the others."

Intent upon reaching the Lear homestead, the saddle-weary girls kept on along the winding highway. It was impossible to make good time for White Foot kept giving Louise trouble. Presently the mare stopped dead in her tracks, then wheeled and started back toward the Burmaster estate. Louise, bouncing helplessly, shrieked to her chum for help.

"Rein her in!" Penny shouted.

When Louise seemed unable to obey, Penny rode Bones alongside and seized the reins. White Foot then stopped willingly enough.

"All I ask of life is to get off this creature!" Louise half sobbed. "I'm tired enough to die! And we've had nothing to eat since noon."

"Oh, brace up," Penny encouraged her. "It can't be much farther to Mrs. Lear's place. I'll lead your horse for awhile."

Seizing the reins again, she led White Foot down the road at a walk. They met no one on the lonely, twisting highway. The only sound other than the steady clop of hoofbeats was an occasional guttural twang from a bullfrog.

The night grew darker. Louise began to shiver, though not so much from cold as nervousness. Her gaze constantly roved along the deep woods to the left of the road. Seeing something white and ghostly amid the trees, she called Penny's attention to it.

"Why, it's nothing," Penny scoffed. "Just an old tree trunk split by lightning. That streak of white is the inner wood showing."

A bend in the road lay just ahead. Rounding it, the girls saw what appeared to be a camp fire glowing in the distance. The wind carried a strong odor of wood smoke.

"Now what's that?" Louise asked uneasily. "Someone camping along the road?"

"I can see a house on ahead," Penny replied. "The bonfire seems to have been built in the yard."

Both girls were convinced that they were approaching the Lear place. The fire, however, puzzled them. And their wonderment grew as they rode closer.

In the glare of the leaping flames they saw a huge,

hanging iron kettle. A dark figure hovered over it, stirring the contents with a stick.

Involuntarily, Penny's hand tightened on the reins and Bones stopped. Louise pulled up so short that White Foot nearly reared back on her hind legs.

"A witch!" Penny exclaimed, half jubilantly. "I've always wanted to meet one, and this is our chance!"

CHAPTER

7

BED AND BOARD

FOR A moment the two girls watched in awe the dark, grotesque figure silhouetted against the leaping flames of the fire. A woman in a long, flowing gown kept stirring the contents of the iron kettle.

"Doesn't she look exactly like a witch!" Penny exclaimed again. "Maybe it's Mrs. Lear."

"If that's the Lear place I know one thing!" Louise announced dramatically. "I'm going straight on to Delta."

Penny knew better than to argue with her chum. Softly she quoted from "Macbeth":

" 'Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.' "

"Trouble is all we've had since we started this wild trip," Louise broke in. "And now you ask me to spend the night with a witch!"

"Not so loud, or the witch may hear you," Penny cautioned. "Don't be silly, Lou. It's only a woman out in her back yard cooking supper."

"At this time of night?"

"Well, it is a bit late, but so are we. Any port in a storm. Come along, Louise. I'll venture that whatever is cooking in that kettle will be good."

Penny rode on and Louise had no choice but to follow. A hundred yards farther on they came to an ancient farmhouse set back from the road. Dismounting, the girls tied their horses to an old-fashioned hitching rack near the sagging gate. A mailbox bore the name: Mrs. M. J. Lear.

"This is the place all right," said Penny.

Just inside the gate stood an ancient domicile that by daylight was shaded by a giant sycamore. Built of small bricks, it had latticed windows, and a gabled front. An iron weathercock perched on the curling shingle roof seemed to gaze saucily down at the girls.

Going around the house to the back yard, Penny and Louise again came within view of the blazing fire. An old woman in a long black dress bent over the smoke-blackened kettle which hung from the iron crane. Hearing footsteps, she glanced up alertly.

"Who is it?" she called, and the crackled voice was sharp rather than friendly.

"Silas Malcom sent us here," Penny said, moving into the arc of flickering light.

"And who be you? Friends o' his?" The hatchet-faced woman peered intently, almost suspiciously at the two girls.

Penny gave her name and Louise's, adding that they were seeking lodging for the night.

"We'll pay, of course," she added.

The old woman scrutinized the girls for so long that they were certain she would send them away. But when she spoke, her voice was friendly.

"Well, well," she cackled, "anybody that's a friend of Silas is a friend of mine. You're welcome to bed and board fer as long as you want to stay."

Penny thanked her and stepped closer to the kettle. "We've not had anything to eat since noon," she said suggestively. "My, whatever you're cooking looks good!" She sniffed at the steam arising from the iron pot and backed hastily away.

Old Mrs. Lear broke into cackling laughter. "You gals don't want none o' that! This here is soap and I'm head over heels in it. That's why I'm workin' so late."

"Soap," repeated Penny with deep respect. "Why, I thought soap was made in a factory."

Mrs. Lear was pleased at the girl's interest. "Most of it is," she said, "but not my soap. This here is homemade soap and I wouldn't trade a cake of it for all the store soap ye can lug home—not for heavy cleanin', I wouldn't."

Moving near enough to the fire to see the greasy mixture bubbling in the kettle, Penny asked Mrs. Lear if she would explain how soap was made.

"Bless you, yes," the old lady replied with enthusiasm. "You are the first gal I ever ran across that was interested in anything as old fashioned as soap makin'. Why, when I was young every girl knew how to make soap and was proud of it. But nowdays! All the girls think about is gaddin' and dancin' and having dates with some worthless good-for-nothin'. Come right up to the fire and I'll show you something about soap makin'."

Mrs. Lear poked the glowing logs beneath the kettle.

"First thing," she explained, "is to get your fire good and hot. Then you add your scrap grease."

"What is scrap grease?" Louise asked, greatly intrigued.

"Why, bless you, child, that's the odds and ends of cookin' that most folks throw away. Not me though. I make soap of it. Even if it ain't so good smellin' it's better soap than you can buy."

The girls looked over the rim of the steaming kettle and saw a quantity of bubbling fats. With surprising dexterity for one of her age, Mrs. Lear inserted a long-handled hoe-shaped paddle and stirred the mixture vigorously.

"Next thing ye do is to cook in the lye," she in-

structed. "Then you let it cool off and slice it to any size you want. This mess'll soon be ready."

"And that's all there is to making soap," Penny said, a bit amazed in spite of herself.

"All but a little elbow grease and some git up and git!" the old lady chuckled. "Them two commodities are mighty scarce these days."

While the girls watched, Mrs. Lear poured off the soap mixture. She would not allow them to help lest they burn themselves.

"I kin tell that you girls are all tuckered out," she said when the task was finished. "Just put your horses in the barn and toss 'em some corn and hay. While you're gone I'll clean up these soap makin' things and start a mess o' victuals cookin'."

Mrs. Lear waved a bony hand toward a large, unpainted outbuilding. Louise and Penny led their horses to it, opening the creaking old barn door somewhat cautiously. A sound they could not instantly identify greeted their ears.

"What was that?" Louise whispered, holding back.

"Only a horse gnawing corn!" Penny chuckled. "Mrs. Lear must keep a steed of her own."

It was dark in the barn even with the doors left wide open. Groping their way to empty stalls, the girls unsaddled and tied the horses up for the night. Mrs. Lear's animal, they noted, was a high-spirited animal, evidently a thoroughbred.

"A riding horse too," Penny remarked. "Wonder how she can afford to keep it?"

Finding corn in the bin, the girls fed Bones and White Foot, and forked them an ample supply of hay.

"Now to feed ourselves," Penny sighed as they left the barn. "My stomach feels as empty as the Grand Canyon!"

The girls had visions of a bountiful supper cooked over the camp fire. However, Mrs. Lear was putting out the glowing coals with a bucket of water.

"Come into the house," she urged. "It won't take me long to git a meal knocked up. That is, if you ain't too particular."

"Anything suits us," Louise assured her.

"And the more of it, the better," Penny muttered, though under her breath.

Mrs. Lear led the way to the house, advising the girls to wait at the door until she could light a kerosene lamp. By its ruddy glow they saw a kitchen, very meagerly furnished with old-fashioned cook stove, a homemade table and a few chairs.

"While you're washin' up I'll put on some victuals to cook," Mrs. Lear said, showing the girls a wash basin and pitcher. "It won't take me a minute."

With a speed that was amazing, the old lady lighted the cook stove and soon had a bed of glowing coals. She warmed up a pan of potatoes, fried salt pork and hominy. From a pantry shelf she brought wild grape

jelly and a loaf of homemade bread. To complete the meal she set before the girls a pitcher of milk and a great glass dish brimming with canned peaches.

"It ain't much," she apologized.

"Food never looked better," Penny declared, drawing a chair to the kitchen table.

"It's a marvelous supper!" Louise added, her eyes fairly caressing the food.

Mrs. Lear sat down at the table with the girls and seemed to take keen delight in watching them eat. Whenever their appetites lagged for an instant she would pass them another dish.

"Now that you've et, tell me who you are and why you came," Mrs. Lear urged after the girls had finished. "You say Silas sent you?"

Good food had stimulated Penny and Louise and made them in a talkative mood. They told of their long trip from Riverview and almost before they realized it, had spoken of the Headless Horseman. Mrs. Lear listened attentively, her watery blue eyes dancing with interest. Suddenly Penny cut her story short, conscious that the old lady deliberately was pumping her of information.

"So you'd like to collect Mr. Burmaster's reward?" Mrs. Lear chuckled.

"We shouldn't mind," Penny admitted. "Besides, we'd be doing the Burmasters a good turn to help them get rid of their ghost rider."

"That you would," agreed the old lady exactly as if the Burmasters were her best friends. "Yes, indeed, you've come in a good cause."

"Then perhaps you can help us," Louise said eagerly. "You must have heard about the Headless Horseman."

Mrs. Lear nodded brightly.

"Perhaps you know who the person is," Penny added.

"Maybe, maybe not." Mrs. Lear shrugged, and getting quickly up, began to carry the dishes to the sink. The firm tilt of her thin chin warned the girls that so far as she was concerned, the topic was closed.

Rather baffled, Penny and Louise made a feeble attempt to reopen the conversation. Failing, they offered to wipe the dishes for their hostess.

"Oh, it ain't no bother to do 'em myself," Mrs. Lear said, shooing them away. "You both look tired enough to drop. Just go up to the spare bedroom and slip beneath the covers."

Louise and Penny needed no further urging. Carrying their knapsacks and a lamp Mrs. Lear gave them, they stumbled up the stairs. The spare bedroom was a huge, rather cold chamber, furnished with a giant fourposter bed and a chest of drawers. The only floor covering was a homemade rag rug.

Louise quickly undressed and left Penny to blow out the light. The latter, moving to the latticed win-

dow, stood for a moment gazing out across the moonlit fields toward the Burmaster estate.

"Nothing makes sense about this trip," she remarked.

From the bed came a muffled: "Now you're talking!"

Ignoring the jibe, Penny resumed: "Did you notice how Mrs. Lear acted just as if the Burmasters were her friends."

"Perhaps she did that to throw us off the track. She asked us plenty of questions but she didn't tell us one thing!"

"Yet she knows plenty. I'm convinced of that."

"Oh, come on to bed," Louise pleaded, yawning. "Can't you do your speculating in the morning?"

With a laugh, Penny leaped into the very center of the feather bed, missing her chum's anatomy by inches.

Soon Mrs. Lear came upstairs. She tapped softly on the door and inquired if the girls had plenty of covers. Assured that they were comfortable, she went on down the hall to her own room.

Worn from the long horseback ride, Louise fell asleep almost at once. Penny felt too excited to be drowsy. She lay staring up at the ceiling, reflecting upon the day's events. So far, the journey to the Valley had netted little more than sore muscles.

"Yet there's mystery and intrigue here—I know

it!" Penny thought. "If only I could get a little tangible information!"

An hour elapsed and still the girl could not sleep. As she stirred restlessly, she heard Mrs. Lear's bedroom door softly creak. In the hallway boards began to tremble. Penny stiffened, listening. Distinctly, she could hear someone tiptoeing past her door to the stairway.

"That must be Mrs. Lear," she thought. "But what can she be doing up at this time of night?"

The question did not long remain unanswered. Boards squeaked steadily as the old lady descended the stairs. A little silence. Then Penny heard two long rings and a short one.

"Mrs. Lear is calling someone on the old-fashioned party-line telephone!" she identified the sound.

Mrs. Lear's squeaky voice carried clearly up the stairway through the half open bedroom door.

"That you, Silas?" Penny heard her say. "Well, those gals got here, just as you said they would! First off they asked me about the Headless Horseman."

A slight pause followed before Mrs. Lear added: "Don't you worry none, Silas. Just count on me! They'll handle soft as kittens!"

And as she ended the telephone conversation, the old lady broke into cackling laughter.

CHAPTER

8

A RICH MAN'S TROUBLES

RAIN WAS drumming on the roof when Penny awakened the next morning. Yawning sleepily, she sat up in bed. Beside her, Louise, curled into a tight ball, slumbered undisturbed. But not for long. Penny tickled an exposed foot until she opened her eyes.

"Get up, Lou!" she ordered pleasantly. "We've overslept."

"Oh, it's still night," Louise grumbled, trying to snuggle beneath the covers again.

Penny stripped off all the blankets and pulled her chum from the bed. "It's only so dark because it's raining," she explained. "Anyway, I have something important to tell you."

As the girls dressed in the cold bedroom, Penny told Louise of the telephone conversation she had heard the previous night.

"Mrs. Lear was talking to Silas Malcom I'm sure," she concluded. "And about us too! She said we'd handle very easily."

Louise's eyes opened a trifle wider. "Then you figure Silas Malcom intended to get us here on purpose!"

"I'm beginning to think so."

"But why?"

"Don't ask me," Penny said with a shrug. "These Valley folk aren't simple by any means! Unless we watch our step they may take us for a merry ride."

"Not with the Headless Horseman, I hope," Louise chuckled. "Why don't we go home this morning and forget the whole silly affair?"

Penny shook her head. "I'm sticking until I find out what's going on here," she announced. "It might mean a story for Dad's paper!"

"Oh, that's only your excuse," Louise teased. "You know you never could resist a mystery, and this one certainly has baffling angles."

The girls washed in a basin of cold water and then went downstairs. Mrs. Lear was baking pancakes in the warm kitchen. She flipped one neatly as she reached with the other hand to remove the coffee pot from the stove.

"Good morning," she chirped. "Did you sleep right last night?"

Penny and Louise agreed that they had and edged close to the stove for warmth. An old-fashioned clock on the mantel showed that it was only eight

o'clock. But eight o'clock for Mrs. Lear was a late hour, judging by the amount of work she had done. A row of glass jars stood on the table, filled with canned plums and peaches.

"You haven't put up all that fruit this morning?" gasped Louise.

Mrs. Lear admitted that she had. "But that ain't much," she added modestly. "Only a bushel and a half. Won't hardly last no time at all."

Mrs. Lear cleared off the kitchen table, set it in a twinkling, and placed before the girls a huge mound of stacked cakes.

"Now eat hearty," she advised. "I had mine hours ago."

As Penny ate, she sought to draw a little information from the eccentric old woman. Deliberately, she brought up the subject of the Burmaster family.

"What is it you want to know?" Mrs. Lear asked, smiling wisely.

"Why is Mrs. Burmaster so disliked in the community?"

"Because she's a scheming, trouble maker if there ever was one!" the old lady replied promptly. "Mr. Burmaster ain't so bad, only he's pulled around by the nose by that weepin', whinin' wife of his."

"Mrs. Burmaster seems to think that the valley folk treat her cruelly."

"She should talk about being cruel!" Mrs. Lear's dark eyes flashed. "You know what them Burmasters done?"

"Only in a general way."

"Well, they come here, and forced folks to git off the land."

"Didn't Mr. Burmaster pay for what he bought?"

"Oh, it was done legal," Mrs. Lear admitted grudgingly. "You see, most o' this valley was owned by a man in the East. He rented it out in parcels, an' never bothered anyone even if they was behind in their payments."

"Then Mr. Burmaster bought the entire track of land from the Eastern owner?" inquired Penny.

"That's right. All except these here four acres where my house sets. They ain't nothin' in this world that will git me in a mood to sell to that old skinflint. He's tried every trick in the bag already."

Penny thoughtfully reached for another pancake. As an impartial judge she could see that there was something to be said on both sides of the question. Mr. Burmaster had purchased his land legally, and so could not be blamed for asking the former renters to move. Yet she sympathized with the farmers who for so many years had considered the valley their own.

"This house o' mine ain't much to look at," Mrs.

Lear commented reflectively, "but it's been home fer a long time. Ain't nobody going to get me out o' here."

"You own your own land?" inquired Louise.

"That I do," nodded Mrs. Lear proudly. "I got the deed hid under my bed mattress."

"Won't you tell us about Mr. Burmaster's difficulty with the Headless Horseman," Penny urged, feeling that the old lady was in a talkative mood.

"What do you want to know?" Mrs. Lear asked cautiously.

"Is there really such a thing or is it just a story?"

"If you girls stay in this valley long enough you'll learn fer yourselves," Mrs. Lear chuckled. "I'll warrant you'll see that Horseman."

"And you know who the prankster is!" Penny ventured daringly.

"Maybe I do," Mrs. Lear admitted with a chuckle. "But a ten-mule team couldn't pry it out o' me, and neither can you!"

Before Penny could resume the subject, chickens began to squawk and scatter in the barn yard. A large, expensive looking car pulled up near the side door. Mrs. Lear peeped out of a window and her jaw set in a firm, hard line.

"That's Mr. Burmaster now," she announced in a stage whisper. "Well, he ain't goin' to pressure me. No sir! I'll give him as good as he sends!"

After Mr. Burmaster pounded on the kitchen door, the old lady took her time before she let him in.

"Good morning," he said brightly.

"Humph! What's good about it?" Mrs. Lear shot back. "It's rainin', ain't it? And if we git much more o' it this fall, the dam up Huntley way's goin' to let go shore as I'm a standin' here."

"Nonsense!" replied the estate owner impatiently. He stepped into the kitchen. Seeing Penny and Louise, he looked rather surprised and a trifle embarrassed.

"Go on and say what you come to say," Mrs. Lear encouraged. "Don't stand on no ceremony jus' cause I got city visitors."

Obviously Mr. Burmaster did not like to speak before strangers, but there was no other way.

"You know why I am here, Mrs. Lear," he began. "I've already made several offers for your property—"

"And I've turned 'em all down."

"Yes, but this time I hope you'll listen to reason. Last night my wife had a near collapse after a boy rode a horse across the bridge by our house. All this stupid talk about Headless Horsemen has inspired the community to do mischief. Now every boy in the Valley is trying pranks."

"Then why not ketch the Horseman and put an end to it?" Mrs. Lear asked impudently.

"Nothing would please me better. But we've had

no success. My wife can't endure the strain much longer. It's driving her to a frenzy."

"I'm sorry about that," replied Mrs. Lear stonily. "There ain't nothin' I can do."

"I want you to sell this property," Mr. Burmaster pleaded. "At least that will remove one irritation. You see, my wife considers the place an eyesore. She can see your house from our living room window. It ruins an otherwise perfect view of the valley."

"Now ain't that too bad!" Mrs. Lear's tone was sarcastic. "Well, let me tell you somethin'. That place o' yorn spoils my view too!"

"I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear," Mr. Burmaster said hastily. "It's a matter of my wife's health."

"Your wife ain't no more ailin' than I be," Mrs. Lear retorted. "If she didn't have my house to bother her it would be somethin' else. I ain't goin' to sell and that's all there is to it!"

"You've not heard my offer. I'll give you two thousand dollars for this place—cash."

Mrs. Lear looked a trifle stunned.

"At best the place isn't worth five hundred," Mr. Burmaster resumed. "But I aim to be generous."

"I won't sell," Mrs. Lear said firmly. "Not at any price. Them's my final words."

Mr. Burmaster had kept his voice carefully controlled but the old lady's decision angered him.

"You'll regret this!" he said in a harsh tone. "I've been very patient but I warn you! From now on I shall act in my own interests."

"Have you ever acted in any other?" drawled a voice from behind the estate owner.

Everyone turned quickly. Joe Quigley, the young station agent, stood framed in the open doorway. Smiling at Burmaster in grim way, he came slowly into the kitchen.

CHAPTER

9

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER

A SILENCE had fallen upon those in the room. Joe Quigley shook rain drops from his overcoat. Deliberately he took his time hanging the coat over a chair in front of the cook stove. Then, still smiling in an ironic way, he faced Burmaster.

"I repeat," he challenged, "did you ever act in any manner except for your own interest?"

"You are insulting! Insolent!" Mr. Burmaster snapped. "But I'll not be drawn into an argument with you. Good morning!"

Quigley blocked the door. "Not so fast," he drawled. "Matter of fact, I was on my way to your house. Saw your car standing in Mrs. Lear's yard, so I figured you were here."

"If you have a telegram for me I'll take it."

"The only message I have is a verbal one," answered Quigley. "Our mayor from Delta, Bradley Mason, asked me to talk to you about the Huntley Dam."

"The subject doesn't interest me."

"It should interest every man, woman and child in this valley!" Quigley retorted. "If the dam gives way flood waters will sweep straight down the valley. Your house would be destroyed before you knew there was any danger!"

"Really?" Mr. Burmaster's smile was a sneer. "Let me worry about my own property."

"As a matter of record, I don't lose any sleep over you," Quigley responded heatedly. "But I am thinking about Mrs. Lear and the people living in Delta. Not to mention the towns on down the line which would be in the direct path of the flood."

"If the good people of Delta are endangered why don't they repair the dam themselves?"

"For the reason that we can't raise the money. We've tried."

"Then the State should act in the matter. I'm willing to write my senator—"

"Repairs are needed now, not three months later. Mr. Burmaster, you have the money and you'd be doing the community a great service to lend help. We're not asking for a donation. It's as much to your interest as ours to protect the valley."

"There's no danger," Burmaster said angrily. "Not a particle. It's only a scheme to shake me down for money."

Brushing past the station agent, the man went out

into the rain. In driving out of the yard he turned the car so sharply that it skidded on its wheels.

"Well, that's that," Quigley remarked with a shrug. "I should have saved my breath."

"I'm glad *he's* gone," Mrs. Lear announced tartly. "Will you have a bite o' breakfast, Joe?"

"No, thanks," the young station agent replied. "I'm due for my trick at the Depot in twenty minutes. Have to run along."

The girls were sorry to see Joe Quigley go so soon for they had hoped to have a long talk with him. After he had disappeared into the rain they tried without much success to draw more information from Mrs. Lear. The old lady was in no mood to discuss the Burmasters, but she did have a great deal to say about flood danger to the valley.

" 'Tain't usual that we have so much rain," she declared. "Not at this time o' year. Old Red River's floodin' to the brim, an keeps pourin' more and more into the Huntley Lake basin. The dam there was built years ago and it wasn't much to brag on from the start."

"Haven't authorities inspected the dam recently?" Penny inquired thoughtfully.

"Oh, some young whippersnapper come here a month ago and took a quick look and said the dam would hold," Mrs. Lear replied, tossing her head.

"But he ain't livin' in the Valley. We want repairs made and we want 'em quick—not next year."

"Since Mr. Burmaster refuses to help is there nothing that can be done?"

"There's some as thinks a little piece in the city papers might help," Mrs. Lear said, giving Penny a quick, shrewd glance. "Your pa's a newspaper owner, ain't he?"

"Yes, he owns the *Riverview Star.*"

Penny gazed across the table at Louise. It struck both girls that Mrs. Lear was very well informed about their affairs. How had the old lady learned that Mr. Parker was a newspaper man if not from Silas Malcom? More than ever Penny was convinced that she had been lured to Red Valley, perhaps for the purpose of interesting her famous father in the Huntley Dam project.

"You've been very kind, Mrs. Lear," she said, abruptly arising from the table. "Louise and I appreciate your hospitality. However, we want to pay for our room and meals before we go."

"You don't owe me a penny," the old lady laughed. "Furthermore, you ain't leavin' yet."

"We must. There's an afternoon train—"

"And there'll be another along tomorrow. Why, you'd catch your death o' cold ridin' hoss back all the way to Hobostein."

"The rain should let up soon."

"It should, but it won't," Mrs. Lear declared. "Why don't you stay until tomorror anyhow? Then you could go to the barn dance tonight at Silas' place."

At the moment, the girls were not greatly intrigued at the prospect of attending a barn dance. The steady rain had depressed them. Though the long journey to Red Valley had proven interesting, it scarcely seemed worth the exhausting effort. They had learned very little about the so-called Headless Horseman and doubted that any truly valuable information would come their way.

"If you stay over maybe you'll git a chance to see that hoss-ridin' ghost," Mrs. Lear said slyly. "Seems like it's mostly on bad nights that he does his prowlin'."

The girls helped with the dishes. They made their bed and watched Mrs. Lear sew on a rag rug. At intervals they wandered to the windows. Rain fell steadily, showing not the slightest sign of a let up.

"Didn't I tell you," Mrs. Lear said gleefully. "It's settlin' for a good healthy pour. You might jest as well calculate on stayin' another night."

"But our parents will be expecting us home," Louise protested.

"Send 'em a wire from Delta," Mrs. Lear urged. "Reckon this rain'll maybe slacken a bit come afternoon."

Throughout the long morning Louise and Penny wandered restlessly about the house. Now and then they sought without success to draw information from Mrs. Lear about the mysterious prankster. From the merry twinkle in her eyes they were convinced she knew a great deal. Pry it from her they could not.

"Maybe that Headless Horseman ain't nobody human," she chuckled. "Maybe it's a real haunt. I mind the time somebody witched my cow. The stubborn critter didn't give no milk for eight days steady."

Penny and Louise weren't sure whether the old lady was serious or trying to tease them. After awhile they gave up attempting to solve such an enigma. By noon they had reconciled themselves to staying another night at Red Valley. However, scarcely had they made their decision to remain, than the sky cleared.

"We're stuck here anyway," Penny sighed. "We couldn't possibly ride our horses back to Hobostein in time to catch the afternoon train."

After luncheon the girls hiked across-fields to the picturesque little town of Delta. There they dropped in at the depot to chat with Joe Quigley and send a telegram to their parents.

"If time's heavy on your hands why not take a little jaunt to the Huntley Dam?" the station agent suggested. "It should be well worth your time."

Penny and Louise decided to do just that. At Mrs.

Lear's once more, they saddled their horses and took the pike road to a well-marked trail which led up into the hills. Ditches were brimming with fast running water, yet there was no other evidence of flood.

"Do you suppose all this talk about the dam being weak is just talk?" Penny speculated as they rode along. "In case of real danger one would think State authorities would step into the picture."

Soon the girls came to the winding Red River. Swollen by the fall rains, the current raced madly over rocks and stones. The roar of rushing water warned them that they were close to the dam. In another moment they glimpsed a mighty torrent of water pouring in a silvery white ribbon over the high barrier.

Men could be seen working doggedly as they piled sandbag upon sandbag to strengthen the weakened structure.

Suddenly Penny noticed a man and woman who wore raincoats, watching the workmen.

"Lou, there's Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster!" she exclaimed.

They drove closer to the dam. Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster were talking so earnestly together that they did not observe the newcomers. The roar of water drowned the sound of hoofbeats. But the wind blew directly toward the girls. Mrs. Burmaster's voice, shrill and angrily, came to them clearly:

"You can't do it, John! I won't allow it!" she admonished her husband. "You're not to give the people of this valley one penny! The dam is perfectly safe."

"I'm not so sure," he said, pointing to the far side of the structure.

As he spoke a tiny portion of the dam seemed to melt away. The girls, watching tensely, saw several sandbags swept over the brink. Workmen raced to repair the damage. Mrs. Burmaster seemed stunned by the sight, but only for an instant.

"I don't care!" she cried. "Not a penny of our money goes into this dam! It will hold. Anyway, I'd rather drown than be bested by that hateful old lady Lear!"

"But Matilda—"

"Don't speak to me of it again! Get her out of this Valley—tear down her shack! If you don't, I warn you, I'll take matters into my own hands!"

Turning abruptly, Mrs. Burmaster walked angrily down the trail.

CHAPTER

10

BARN DANCE

MR. BURMASTER was too distracted to pay heed to Penny and Louise. Brushing past them, he hastened after his wife.

Neither of the girls commented upon the conversation they had overheard. For a long while they sat on their horses, gazing in awe at the tumbling water.

"If ever that dam should let go—" Penny shuddered, "why, the valley would be flooded in just a few minutes. I doubt folks could be warned in time."

"It looks as if it could give way any second too," Louise added uneasily. "Why don't we get out of this valley and stay away?"

"And forget the mystery?"

"A lot of good a mystery would do us if that dam lets go! Penny, we were crazy to come here in the first place!"

"But I want to get a big story for Dad's paper. There's one here."

"I know not what course others may take," Louise quoted grandly. "As for myself, I'm going home on tomorrow's train—rain or shine."

"We'll both have to go," Penny agreed in a discouraged tone. "I had my chance here, but somehow I've muffed it."

For a half hour longer the girls remained at the dam watching the workmen. Presently returning to the Lear cottage they found Mrs. Lear in the warm kitchen, cooking supper.

"I'm settin' the victuals on early tonight," she announced. "We ain't got any too much time to git to the frolic at Silas' place."

Penny and Louise were not sure that they cared to attend the barn dance. Mrs. Lear, however, was deaf to all excuses. She whisked supper onto the table and the instant dishes were done, said that she would hitch Trinidad to the buggy.

"It won't take us long to git there," she encouraged the girls as they reluctantly followed her to the barn. "Trinidad's a fast steppin' critter. Best horse in the county fer that matter."

Soon the ancient buggy was rattling at a brisk clip along the winding woodland road. Mrs. Lear allowed Trinidad to slacken pace as they neared the Burmaster estate.

"Look at that house!" she chortled, waving her buggy whip. "Every light in the place lit up! Know

why? Mrs. Burmaster's afeared o' her shadder. Come dark and she's skeared to stick her nose out the door."

"You don't seem to be afraid of anything," Penny remarked in admiration.

"Me afeared?" the old lady laughed gleefully. "What's there to be skeared of?"

"Well—perhaps a certain Headless Horseman."

Mrs. Lear hooted. "If I was to see that critter a-comin' right now and he had twenty heads, I wouldn't even bat an eye!"

Horse and buggy approached the giant tulip tree whose gnarled branches were twisted into fantastic shapes. "See that tree?" Mrs. Lear demanded. "In Revolutionary days a traitor was hanged from that lower limb. Sometimes you kin still hear his spirit sighin' and moanin'."

"You mean the wind whistling through the tree limbs," Penny supplied.

"Didn't sound like wind to me," Mrs. Lear corrected with a grin. "There's some that's afeared to pass under this tree come night—but not me!"

The buggy rattled on, its top brushing against the overhanging branches of the giant tulip. It had grown very dark and the shadows of the woods had a depressing effect upon the girls. They were glad to see the lights of the Malcom place on the hill and even more pleased to drive into the yard.

"You gals go right on in," Mrs. Lear advised, leap-

ing lightly from the buggy. "I'll look after Trinidad."

The barn dance already was in progress. Crossing the yard, the girls could hear gay laughter above the lively squeak of fiddles. Through the open barn door they glimpsed a throng of young people whirling in the intricate steps of a square dance.

"We're certain to be wall flowers at a party such as this," Louise remarked sadly.

The girls found themselves a quiet corner from which to watch the merrymakers. However, they were not permitted to remain there. At the end of the first dance, Joe Quigley came to ask Penny for a dance. To Louise's secret joy he brought along a young man who promptly invited her to be his partner.

"But we don't know how to square dance," Penny protested.

"Won't take you long to learn," Joe chuckled, pulling her to her feet.

The fiddler broke into a lively tune. Silas Malcom, acting as caller, shouted boisterous directions to the dancers: "Balance all, balance eight, swing 'em like a-swingin' on a gate."

Joe Quigley, expert dancer that he was, fairly swept Penny through the intricate formations. Before she hardly was aware of it, the dance was over and Silas' called out: "Meet your partner and promenade home."

After that the girls did not lack for partners. The night sped on magic wings. Penny danced many times with Joe and ate supper with him. Then, noticing that the party was starting to break up, she looked about for Mrs. Lear. The old lady was nowhere to be seen. Nor could Louise recall having seen her for the past half hour. Somewhat disturbed, they crossed the room to talk to old Silas Malcom.

"Mrs. Lear went home a good hour ago," he told them. "She said she had to git some sleep, but you gals was havin' so much fun she didn't have the heart to take you away."

Penny and Louise could not hide their consternation. With Mrs. Lear gone they would have no way of getting back to the cottage.

"Don't you worry none," Old Silas chuckled. "Joe Quigley will take you home. An' if he don't there's plenty o' young bucks waitin' fer the chanst."

The arrangement was not in the least to the girls' liking. The party, they could see, rapidly was breaking up. Joe Quigley seemed to have disappeared. Nearly all of the girls except themselves were supplied with escorts.

"I don't like this—not by a little bit!" Penny muttered. "Let's get out of here, Lou."

"How will we get back to Mrs. Lear's place?"

"Walk."

"Without an escort?"

"It's not far."

"We'll have to pass the Burmaster place and that horrid tulip tree."

"Who's afraid of a tulip tree?" Penny laughed. "Come on, if we don't get away quickly Old Silas will ask some young man to take us home. That would be humiliating."

Louise reluctantly followed her chum. The girls obtained their wraps and without attracting attention, slipped out a side door.

"Why do you suppose Mrs. Lear slipped off without saying a word?" Louise complained as she and Penny walked rapidly along the dark, muddy road. "Our shoes will be ruined!"

"So is my ego!" Penny added irritably. "Joe Quigley certainly let us down too. He was attentive enough until after supper. Then he simply vanished."

The night was very dark for driving clouds had blotted out the stars. Overhanging trees cast a cavernous gloom upon the twisting hillside road. Louise caught herself shivering. Sternly she told herself that it came from the cold air rather than nervousness.

Presently the girls approached the Burmaster estate. No lights were burning, but the rambling building loomed up white and ghost-like through the trees.

"I'll breathe natural when we're across the bridge,"

Penny admitted with a laugh. "If Mr. Burmaster keeps a guard hidden in the bushes, the fellow might heave a rock at us on general principles."

There was no sign of anyone near the estate. Yet both Penny and Louise sensed that they were being watched. The unpleasant sensation of uneasiness increased as they drew nearer the foot bridge.

"Penny, I'm scared," Louise suddenly admitted.

"Of what?" Penny asked with forced cheerfulness.

"It's too quiet."

The half-whispered words died on Louise's lips. Unexpectedly, the stillness of the night was broken by the clatter of hoofbeats.

Startled, the girls whirled around. A horse with a rider had plunged through the dense bushes only a short distance behind them. At a hard run he came straight toward the foot bridge.

"The ghost rider!" Louise whispered in terror.

She and Penny stood frozen in their tracks. Plainly they could see the white-robed figure. His lumpy, misshapen hulk, seemed rigidly fastened to the horse. Where his head should have been there was only a stub.

CHAPTER

11

THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN

SWIFT AS the wind, the headless horseman approached the narrow bridge. Penny seized Louise's hand, jerking her off the road. The ghost rider thundered past them onto the bridge planks which resounded beneath the steel-shod hoofs.

"Jeepers creepers!" Penny whispered. "That's no boy prankster this time! It's the real thing!"

The thunder of hoofbeats had not gone unheard by those within the walls of Sleepy Hollow. Lights flashed on in the house. Two men with lanterns came running from the mill shack.

"Get him! Get him!" screamed a woman's voice from an upstairs window of the house.

The clamor did not seem to disturb the goblin rider. At unchanged pace he clattered across the bridge to its far side. As the two men ran toward him, he suddenly swerved, plunging his horse across a ditch and up a steep bank. There he drew rein for an instant.

Rising in his stirrups, he hurled a small, hard object at the two guards. It missed them by inches and fell with a thud on the bridge. Then with a laugh that resembled no earthly sound, the Headless Horseman rode through a gap in the bushes and was gone.

Louise and Penny ran to the bridge. Half way across they found the object that had been hurled. It was a small, round stone to which had been fastened a piece of paper.

Penny picked up the missile. Before she could examine it, Mr. Burmaster came running from the house. He had not taken time to dress, but had thrown a bathrobe over his pajamas.

"You let that fellow get away again!" he shouted angrily to the two workmen. "Can't you ever stay on the job?"

"See here, Mr. Burmaster," one of the men replied. "We work eight hours a day and then do guard duty at night. You can't expect us to stay awake twenty-four hours a day!"

"All right, all right," Mr. Burmaster retorted irritably. Turning toward the bridge he saw Louise and Penny. "Well, so you're here again?" he observed, though not in an unfriendly tone.

Penny explained that she and Louise had attended the barn dance and were on their way to the Lear cabin.

"What's that you have in your hand?" he interrupted.

"A stone that the Headless Horseman threw at your workmen. There's a paper tied to it."

"Let's have it," Mr. Burmaster commanded.

Penny handed over the stone though she would have preferred to have examined it herself. Mr. Burmaster cut the string which kept the paper in place. He held it beneath one of the lanterns.

Large capital letters cut from newspaper headlines had been pasted in an uneven row across the page. The words spelled a message which read:

"KICK IN HANDSOMELY ON THE HUNTLEY DAM FUND. IF YOU OBLIGE, THE GALLOPING GHOST WILL BOTHER YOU NO MORE."

Mr. Burmaster read the message aloud and crumpling the paper, stuffed it into the pocket of his robe.

"There, you see!" he cried angrily. "It's all a plot to force me to put up money for the Huntley Dam!"

"Who do you think the prankster is?" Penny asked.

"How should I know!" Mr. Burmaster stormed. "The townspeople of Delta may be behind the scheme. Or those hill rats like Silas Malcom! Then it could be Old Lady Lear."

"Can she ride a horse?" Louise interposed.

"Can that old witch ride?" Mr. Burmaster snorted.

"She was born in a saddle. Has one of the best horses in the valley too. A jumper."

Penny and Louise thought of Trinidad with new respect. Not without misgiving they recalled that Mrs. Lear had slipped away from the barn dance ahead of them. Wisely they kept the knowledge to themselves.

"I'll give a thousand dollars for the capture of that rascal!" Mr. Burmaster went on. "And if it proves to be Mrs. Lear I'll add another five hundred."

"Why, not be rid of the Ghost in an easier way?" Penny suggested. "Give the money to the Huntley Dam Fund."

"Never! I'll not be blackmailed! Besides, the rains are letting up. There's no danger."

Penny and Louise did not attempt to argue the matter. The Huntley Dam feud was none of their concern. By the following day they expected to be far from the valley.

"There's another person who might be behind this," Mr. Burmaster continued. "A newspaper editor at Hobostein. He always hated me and he's been using his paper to write ugly editorials. I ought to sue him for slander."

Though the Headless Horseman episode had excited the girls, they were tired and eager to get to Mrs. Lear's. Accordingly, they cut the conversation short and started on down the road. Mr. Burmaster

fell into step walking with them as far as the house.

"Come to see us sometime," he invited with a cordiality that astonished the girls. "Mrs. Burmaster gets very lonesome. She's nervous but she means well."

"I'm sure she does," Penny responded kindly. She hesitated, then added: "I do hope you catch the prankster. Have you considered putting a barricade at the end of the bridge?"

"Can't do it. When we built this place we had to agree to keep the footbridge open to pedestrians."

"Suppose one had a moveable barrier," Penny suggested. "Couldn't your workmen keep watch and swing it into place after the Horseman started across the bridge? With one at each end he'd be trapped."

"It's an idea to be considered," Mr. Burmaster admitted. "The only trouble is that my workmen aren't worth their salt as guards. But we'll see."

Penny and Louise soon bade the estate owner goodnight and went on down the road. Once beyond hearing they discussed the possibility that Mrs. Lear might have masqueraded as the Headless Horseman.

"It was queer the way she disappeared from the dance," Penny speculated. "Granting that she's a spry old lady, I doubt she'd have it in her to pull off the trick."

"I'm not so sure," Louise argued. "Mr. Burmaster said she was a wonderful rider. Didn't you think that horse tonight looked like Trinidad?"

"Goodness, it was too dark to see! In any case, what about the buggy?"

"Mrs. Lear could have unhitched it somewhere in the woods."

Penny shook her head. "It doesn't add up somehow. For that matter, nothing about this affair does."

Rounding a curve, the girls came within view of the Lear cabin. No light burned, but they took it for granted Mrs. Lear had gone to bed.

"Let's give a look-see in the barn," Penny proposed. "I want to make sure that our horses are all right."

"And to see that the buggy is there too," laughed Louise.

They went past the dripping water trough to the barn and opened the doors. White Foot nickered. Bones kicked at the stall boards. Penny tossed both horses a few ears of corn and then walked on to Trinidad's stall. It was empty. Nor was there any evidence of a buggy.

"Well, what do you think of that!" Penny commented. "Mrs. Lear's not been home!"

"Then maybe Mr. Burmaster's theory is right!" Louise exclaimed, staring at the empty stall. "Mrs. Lear could have been the one!"

"Listen!" commanded Penny.

Plainly the girls could hear a horse and vehicle coming down the road. It was Mrs. Lear, and a moment later she turned into the yard. Penny swung open

the barn doors. Trinidad rattled in and pulled up short. His sleek body was covered with sweat as if he had been driven hard.

Mrs. Lear leaped lightly to the barn floor and began to unhitch the horse.

"Well, I'm mighty glad to find you here," she chirped. "Joe brought you home, didn't he?"

Penny replied that she and Louise had walked.

"You don't say!" the old woman exclaimed. "I went down the road a piece to see a friend o' mine. By the time I got back the frolic was over. I calculated Joe must have brought you home."

Penny and Louise offered little comment as they helped Mrs. Lear unhitch Trinidad. However, they could see that the old lady was fairly brimming-over with suppressed excitement.

"It's late, but I ain't one bit tired," Mrs. Lear declared as they all entered the house. "There's somethin' mighty stimulatin' about a barn dance."

Penny was tempted to remark that her hostess had spent very little time at Silas Malcom's place. Instead she remained silent.

The girls went at once to bed. Mrs. Lear did not follow them upstairs immediately, but puttered about the kitchen preparing herself a midnight snack. Finally her step was heard on the stairs.

"Good night, girls," she called cheerfully as she passed their door. "Sleep tight."

Mrs. Lear entered her own bedroom. Her door squeaked shut. A shoe was heard to thud on the floor, then another.

"I wish I knew what to think," Penny confided to Louise in a whisper. "She's the queerest old lady—"

Louise had no opportunity to reply. For both girls were startled to hear a shrill cry from the far end of the hall.

The next instant their bedroom door burst open. Mrs. Lear, grotesque in old fashioned flannel nightgown, staggered into the room.

"Why, what's wrong?" Penny asked in astonishment.

"I've been robbed!" Mrs. Lear proclaimed wildly. "I've been robbed!"

CHAPTER

12

PREMONITIONS

PENNY LEAPED out of bed and touched a match to the wick of an oil lamp. In its flickering yellow glow Mrs. Lear looked as pale as a ghost.

"While we were at the barn dance someone broke into the house," the old lady explained in an agitated voice. "The deed's gone! Now I'll be put off my land like the others. Oh, lawseeme, I wisht I was dead!"

"What deed do you mean?" Penny asked, perplexed.

"Why, the deed to this house and my land! I've always kept it under the mattress o' my bed. Now it's gone!"

"Isn't the deed recorded?"

"No, it ain't. I always calculated on havin' it done, but I wanted to save the fee long as I could. Figured to have the property put in my son's name jes' before

I up and died. He's married and livin' in Omaha. Now see what a mess I'm in."

"If the deed is lost and not recorded, you are in difficulties," Penny agreed.

"Perhaps it isn't lost," said Louise, encouragingly. "Did you search everywhere, Mrs. Lear?"

"I pulled the bed half to pieces."

"We'll help you look for it," Penny offered. "It must be here somewhere."

"This is the fust time in twenty years that anyone ever stole anything off me," the old lady wailed as she led the way down the dark hall. "But I kinda knowed somethin' like this was goin' to happen."

Mrs. Lear's bedroom was in great disorder. Blankets had been strewn over the floor and the limp mattress lay doubled up on the springs.

"You see!" the old lady cried. "The deed's gone! I've looked everywhere."

Penny and Louise carefully folded all the blankets. They straightened the mattress and searched carefully along the springs. They looked beneath the bed. The missing paper was not to be found.

"Are you sure you didn't hide it somewhere else?" Penny asked.

"Fer ten years I've kept that deed under the bed mattress!" the old lady snapped. "Oh, it's been stole all right. An' there's the tracks o' the thievin' rascal that did it too!"

Mrs. Lear lowered the oil lamp closer to the floor. Plainly visible were the muddy heelprints of a woman's shoe. The marks had left smudges on the rag rugs which dotted the room; they crisscrossed the bare floor to the door, the window and the bed. Penny and Louise followed the trail down the hallway to the stairs. They picked it up again in the kitchen and there lost it.

"You don't need to follow them tracks no further," Mrs. Lear advised grimly. "I know who it was that stole the deed. There ain't nobody could o' done it but Mrs. Burmaster!"

"Mrs. Burmaster!" Louise echoed, rather stunned by the accusation.

"She'd move Heaven and Earth to git me off this here bit o' land. She hates me, and I hate her."

"But how could Mrs. Burmaster know you had the deed?" Penny asked. "You never told her, did you?"

"Seems to me like oncst in an argument I did say somethin' about having it here in the house," Mrs. Lear admitted. "We was goin' it hot and heavy one day, an' I don't remember jest what I did tell her. Too much, I reckon."

The old lady sat down heavily in a chair by the stove. She looked sick and beaten.

"Don't take it so hard," Penny advised kindly. "You can't be sure that Mrs. Burmaster stole the deed."

"Who else would want it?"

"Some other person might have done it for spite."

Mrs. Lear shook her head. "So far's I know, I ain't got another enemy in the whole world. Oh, Mrs. Burmaster done it all right."

"But what can she hope to gain?" asked Penny.

"She aims to put me off this land."

"Mr. Burmaster seems like a fairly reasonable man. I doubt he'd make any use of the deed even if his wife turned it over to him."

"Maybe not," Mrs. Lear agreed, "but Mrs. Burmaster ain't likely to give it to her husband. She'll find some other way to git at me. You see!"

Nothing Penny or Louise could say cheered the old lady.

"Don't you worry none about me," she told them. "I'll brew a cup o' tea and take some aspirin. Then maybe I kin think up a way to git that deed back. I ain't through yet—not by a long shot!"

Long after Penny and Louise had gone back to bed the old lady remained in the kitchen. It was nearly three o'clock before they heard her tiptoe upstairs to her room. But at seven the next morning she was abroad as usual and had breakfast waiting for them.

"I've thought things through," she told Penny as she poured coffee from a blackened pot. "It won't do no good to go to Mrs. Burmaster and try to make her give up that deed. I'll jes wait and see what she does fust."

"And in the meantime, the deed may show up," Penny replied. "Even though you think Mrs. Burmaster took it, there's always a chance that it was only misplaced."

"Foot tracks don't lie," the old lady retorted. "I was out lookin' around early this morning. Them prints lead from my door straight toward the Burmasters!"

Deeply as were the girls interested in Mrs. Lear's problem, they knew that they could be of no help to her. Already they had lingered in Red Valley far longer than their original plan. They shuddered to think what their parents would say if and when they returned to Riverview.

"Lou, we have to start for Hobostein right away!" Penny announced. "We'll be lucky if we get there in time to catch a train home."

Mrs. Lear urged her young guests to remain another day, but to her kind invitation they turned deaf ears. In vain they pressed money upon her. She refused to accept anything so Penny was compelled to hide a bill in the teapot where it would be found later.

"You'll come again?" the old lady asked almost plaintively as she bade them goodbye.

"We'll try to," Penny promised, mounting Bones. "But if we do it will be by train."

"I got a feeling I ain't goin' to be here much longer," Mrs. Lear said sadly.

"Don't worry about the deed," Penny tried to cheer her. "Even if Mrs. Burmaster should have it, she may be afraid to try to make trouble for you."

"It ain't just that biddy I'm worried about. It's somethin' deeper." Mrs. Lear's clear gaze swept toward the blue-rimmed hills.

Penny and Louise waited for her to go on. After a moment she did.

"Seen a rain crow a settin' on the fence this morning. There'll be rain an' a lot of it. Maybe the dam will hold, an' again, maybe it won't."

"Shouldn't you move to the hills?" Penny asked anxiously.

Mrs. Lear's answer was a tight smile, hard as granite.

"Nothin' on Earth kin move me off this land. Nothin'. If the flood takes my house it'll take me with it!"

The old lady extended a bony hand and gravely bade each of the girls goodbye.

Penny and Louise rode their horses to the curve of the road and then looked back. Mrs. Lear stood by the gate for all the world like a statue of bronze. They waved a fast farewell but she did not appear to see. Her eyes were raised to the misty hills and she stood thus until the trees blotted her from view.

CHAPTER

13

RAIN

"SOMEHOW I can't get Old Mrs. Lear out of my mind, Lou. I keep wondering what happened at Red Valley after we left."

Penny sprawled on the davenport of the Parker home, one blue wedge draped over its rolling upholstered arm. Her chum, Louise, had curled herself kitten fashion in a chair across the room.

A full week now had elapsed since the two girls had returned to Riverview from Red Valley. During that time it had rained nearly every day. Even now, a misty drizzle kept the girls indoors.

"Wonder if it's raining at Red Valley?" Penny mused.

"Why don't you tear that place out of your mind?" Louise demanded a bit impatiently. "We tried to solve the mystery and we couldn't, so let's forget it."

"I do try, but I can't," Penny sighed. "I keep telling myself Mrs. Lear must be the person who mas-

querades as the Headless Horseman. Yet I can't completely accept such a theory."

"You'll go batty if you keep on!"

"The worst of it is that everyone laughs at me," Penny complained. "If I so much as mention the Headless Horseman Dad starts to crack jokes."

A step sounded on the porch. "Speaking of your father, here he comes now," Louise observed, and straightened in her chair.

Penny did not bother to undrape herself from the davenport. " 'Lo, Dad," she greeted her father as he came in. "Aren't you home early for lunch?"

"I am about half an hour ahead of schedule," Mr. Parker agreed. He spoke to Louise as he casually dropped an edition of the *Riverview Star* into his daughter's hands. "That town of yours has smashed into print, Penny."

"What town?" Penny's feet came down from the arm of the davenport and she seized the paper. "Not Red Valley?"

"Red Valley is very much in the news," Mr. Parker replied. "These rains are weakening the dam and some of the experts are becoming alarmed. They are sending someone up to look it over."

"Oh, Dad! I tried to tell you!" Penny cried excitedly. With Louise peering over her shoulder, she spread out the front page of the paper and read the story.

"Oh, it hardly tells a thing!" she complained after she had scanned it.

"So far there's not been much to report," Mr. Parker replied. "But if the dam should let go—wow! Would that be a story! I'm sending my best staff photographer there to get pictures."

Penny pricked up her ears. "Salt Sommers?" she demanded.

"Yes, the *Star* can't take a chance on being scooped by another paper."

"Speaking of chances, Lou, this is ours!" Penny cried. "Why don't we go to Red Valley with Salt?"

"Now just a minute," interrupted Mr. Parker. "Salt's going there on business and he'll have no time for any hocus-pocus. You'll be a bother to him!"

"A bother to Salt!" Penny protested indignantly. "Why, the very idea!"

"Another thing," Mr. Parker resumed, "Red Valley isn't considered the safest place in the world just now. While it's unlikely the dam will give way, still the possibility exists. If it should, the break will come without warning and there's apt to be a heavy loss of life."

"But not mine," said Penny with great confidence. "Don't forget that I won three ribbons and a medal this year. Not for being a poor swimmer either."

"All the same, I shouldn't be too boastful," her father advised dryly.

"When is Salt leaving?" Penny demanded.

"Any time now. But I'm sure he won't let you tag along."

"We'll see if we can change his mind," Penny grinned, reaching for the telephone. Disregarding her father's frown, she called the photographer at the *Star* office. Salt was leaving for Red Valley in twenty minutes, and he willingly agreed to take two passengers.

"There, you see!" Penny cried triumphantly, slamming the receiver into its hook.

"I don't like the idea," Mr. Parker grumbled. "Let's hear what Mrs. Weems has to say."

The housekeeper, it developed, had a great deal to say. Penny, however, was equal to all arguments. So eloquently did she plead her case that Mrs. Weems weakened.

"You've wanted an old spinning wheel for months," Penny reminded her. "While I'm at Red Valley I'll get one for you."

"It seems to me I've heard that argument before," Mrs. Weems said dryly.

"I didn't get a chance to see about it when I was there last time," Penny hastened on. "This time I'll make it a point, I promise. I'm pretty sure I can get the one Silas Malcom has."

"If you must go, please don't distract Salt with spinning wheels," Mr. Parker said crossly. "Or

Headless Horseman rot. Remember, he has a job to do."

"Lou and I will help him," Penny laughed. "Just wait and see!"

In the end, Mr. Parker and Mrs. Weems reluctantly said that Penny might go. Louise obtained permission from her mother to make the trip, and fifteen minutes later the girls were at the *Star* office. As they entered the wire photo room, a loudspeaker blared forth: "All right, Riverview, go ahead with your fire picture!"

"Goodness, what was that?" Louise exclaimed, startled.

"Only the wire photo dispatcher talking over the loudspeaker from New York," Penny chuckled. "We're about to send a picture out over the network."

"But how?"

"Watch and see," Penny advised.

In the center of the room stood two machines with cylinders, one for transmitting pictures to distant stations, the other for receiving them. On the sending cylinder was wrapped a glossy 8 by 10 photograph of a fire. As Penny spoke, an attendant pressed a starter switch on the sending machine. There was a high pitched rasp as the clutch threw in, and the cylinder bearing the picture began to turn at a steady measured pace.

"It's a complicated process," Penny said glibly.

"A photo electric cell scans the picture and transmits it to all the points on the network. Salt here could tell you more about it."

"Too busy just now," grinned the young photographer. He stood beside a cabinet stuffing flashbulbs into his coat pocket. "It's time we're traveling."

Salt grinned in a harassed but friendly way at the girls. He was tall and freckled and not very good looking. Nevertheless, he was the best photographer on the *Star*.

"I'm afraid we took advantage of you in asking for a ride to Red Valley," Penny apologized.

"Tickled to have you ride along," Salt cut in. He picked up his Speed Graphic camera and slung a supply case over his shoulder. "Well, let's shove off for the wet country."

The ride by press car to Delta was far from pleasant. Salt drove too fast. The road was slippery once the auto left the pavement and ditches brimmed with brown muddy water.

At one point they were forced to detour five miles to avoid a bridge that had washed out. Instead of reaching Delta early in the day as they had planned, it was well into the afternoon before they arrived.

"Where shall I drop you girls?" Salt inquired wearily. "I'll have to work fast if I get any pictures this afternoon."

"Drop us anywhere," Penny said. "We'll spend

the night with Mrs. Lear and go home by train tomorrow."

"Wonder which way it is to the Huntley Dam?"

"We'll show you the road," Penny offered. "It's directly on your way to let us off at the Malcom place. I want to stop there to see about a spinning wheel."

Guided by the two girls, Salt drove up the winding hillside road to Silas Malcom's little farm. There Penny and Louise said goodbye to him and sought to renew acquaintances with the elderly hillman. The old man got up from a porch rocker to greet them cordially.

"Well! Well! I knowed you'd come back one o' these days," he chuckled. "Thank ye mightily fer puttin' them write-ups about Red Valley in the paper."

"I'm afraid I didn't have much to do with it," Penny said modestly. "Red Valley really is a news center these days."

"We're sittin' on a stick o' dynamite here," the old man agreed. "I'm worried about Mrs. Lear. Me and the wife want her to move up here on the hill where she'd be safe, but not that ole gal. She's as stubborn as a mule."

"And what of the Burmasters?"

"I ain't worrin' none about them. They kin look after themselves. They're so cock sure there ain't no danger."

"Then you feel the situation really is serious?"

Old Silas spat into the grass. "When that dam lets go," he said, "there ain't goin' to be no written notice sent ahead. The Burmaster place will be taken, and then Mrs. Lear's. After that the water'll sweep down on Delta faster'n an express train. From there it'll spread out over the whole valley."

"But why don't people move to safety?"

"Down at Delta plenty of 'em are pullin' up stakes," Old Silas admitted. "The Burmasters are sittin' tight though and so is Mrs. Lear."

"We were planning on staying with her tonight," Louise contributed uneasily.

"Reckon you'll be safe enough," Old Silas assured her. "Water level ain't been risin' none in the last ten hours. But if we have another rain above us—look out."

After chatting a bit longer, Penny broached the matter of the spinning wheel. To her delight, Mr. Malcom not only offered to sell it for a small sum, but he volunteered to haul it to the railroad station for shipment.

The slow, tedious wagon ride down to Delta gave the girls added opportunity to seek information from the old man. Penny deliberately spoke of the Headless Horseman. Had the mysterious rider been seen or heard of in the Valley in recent days?

"You can't prove it by me," the old man chuckled.

"I been so busy gettin' in my crops I ain't had no time fer such goins on."

Arriving at Delta, Mr. Malcom drove directly to the railroad station.

"Joe Quigley ought to be around here somewhere," he remarked. "See if you can run him down while I unload this spinnin' wheel."

Penny and Louise entered the deserted waiting room of the depot. The door of the little station office was closed and at first glance they thought no one was there. Then they saw Joe Quigley standing with his back toward them. He was engrossed in examining something on the floor, an object that was below their field of vision.

"Hello, Mr. Quigley!" Penny sang out.

The station agent straightened so suddenly that he bumped his head against the ticket counter. He stared at the girls. Then as they moved toward the little window, he hastily gathered up whatever he had been examining. As if fearful that they would see the object, he crammed it into an open office closet and slammed the door.

CHAPTER

14

A MOVING LIGHT

"WELL, WELL," Joe Quigley greeted the girls cordially. "It's good to see you again. When did you blow into town?"

Louise and Penny came close to the ticket window. They were curious as to what the young station agent had hidden in the closet. However, they did not disclose by look or action that they suspected anything was wrong.

"We drove in about an hour ago," Penny replied carelessly. "We want to ship a spinning wheel by freight to Riverview."

"I'd advise you to send it by express," Quigley said briskly. "That way you'll have it delivered to your door and the difference will be trifling.

"Any way you say," Penny agreed.

Joe went outside with the girls. Silas already had unloaded the spinning wheel. He turned it over to

the station agent and after a bit of goodnatured joshing, drove away.

"I can get this out for you on No. 73," Joe promised the girls. "Come on back to the office while I bill it out."

Penny and Louise followed the station agent into the little ticket room. Their ears were assailed by the chatter of several telegraph instruments mounted around the edge of a circular work desk.

"How many wires come in here?" Penny asked curiously.

"Three. The Dispatcher's wire, Western Union and the Message wire."

Penny listened attentively to the staccato chatter of one of the wires. "D-A, D-A," she said aloud. "Would that be the Delta station call?"

"It is," Quigley agreed, giving her a quick look of surprise.

He sat down at the circular desk and reached for the telegraph key. After tapping out a swift, brief message, he closed the circuit.

"Get that?" he grinned at Penny.

She shook her head ruefully. "I learned the Morse code and that's about all," she confessed. "I used to practice on a homemade outfit Dad fixed up for me."

"Quite a gal!" Quigley said admiringly. "What can't you do?"

This was Penny's opportunity and she seized it.

"Quite a number of things," she answered. "For one, I can't solve a certain mystery that plagues me."

Joe Quigley finished making out the way bill. His eyes danced as he handed Penny her receipt.

"So you admit that you've met your Waterloo in our Galloping Ghost?"

"I admit nothing," Penny retorted. "You could help me if you would!"

"How?"

"I'm sure you know the person who has been causing the Burmasters so much trouble."

"Trouble?" Quigley's eyebrows jerked. "The way I look at it, that Headless Horseman may do 'em a good turn. He may actually save their worthless necks by driving them out of the valley."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that Burmaster can't keep on in his bull headed fashion without bringing tragedy upon himself as well as the valley. Even now it's probably too late to reinforce the dam."

"Then what does your prankster hope to gain?"

"You'll have to ask him," Joe Quigley shrugged. "This is the way I look at it. Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters are deep in a feud. The old lady lost the deed to her place and she figures if she moves off, the Burmasters somehow will take advantage of her."

"They've made no attempt to do so?"

"Not yet. But old Mrs. Lear is convinced Mrs. Burmaster is biding her time."

"It all sounds rather silly."

"Maybe it does to an outsider. But this is the serious part. If the dam should let go there'd be no chance to warn either the Burmasters or Mrs. Lear. Both places should be evacuated."

"Then why isn't it done?"

"Because two stubborn women refuse to listen to reason. Mrs. Burmaster won't budge because she says there's no danger—that it's a scheme to get her out of the valley. Mrs. Lear won't leave her home while the Burmasters stay."

"What's to be done?"

"Ask me something easy." The telegraph instrument was chattering the Delta station call again so Quigley turned to answer it. "If you see Mrs. Lear before you leave here, try to reason with her," he tossed over his shoulder. "I've given up."

The girls nodded goodbye and went outside. Silas Malcom's wagon was nowhere to be seen, and after a brief debate they decided to walk to Mrs. Lear's place.

"Maybe we still can catch a ride home with Salt," Louise remarked dubiously. "With all this talk about the dam, I certainly don't relish spending a night in the valley."

"Oh, Silas said there was no immediate danger unless it rains again," Penny reminded her chum. "What Joe Quigley said about Mrs. Lear worries me. We must try to get her to leave the valley."

"Why not move a mountain?" Louise countered. "It would be a lot easier."

When the girls reached Mrs. Lear's cabin they discovered that word of their arrival in Delta had traveled ahead of them.

"Your room's all ready fer you," the old lady beamed as she greeted them at the door. "This time I hope you're stayin' fer a week."

Nothing seemed changed at the Lear cabin. Mrs. Lear had spent the morning canning fruit, and the kitchen table was loaded with containers. A washing flapped lazily on the line. While waiting for the clothes to dry, the old lady filled in her time by sewing on a rag rug of elaborate pattern.

"I'm a mite behind in my work," she confessed to her young visitors. "These infernal rains set a body back. Fer three days I couldn't get my washin' hung, an' I never will git my corn dried less I do it in the oven."

"Speaking of rain," Penny began hesitantly. "Don't you think it's dangerous to remain here much longer?"

"Maybe it is, maybe it ain't," the old lady retorted. "Either way I'm not worryin'. There ain't nothin'

going to put me off my place—not even a flood."

"Joe Quigley thinks that you and the Burmasters both should move to a safer place."

"Then let 'em go fust," Mrs. Lear declared. "Didn't Mrs. Burmaster steal the deed to my land jest fer meanness and spite? If I was dumb enough to leave this place fer an hour she'd find some way to git it away from me."

"That couldn't be done so easily," smiled Penny. "After all, Mr. Burmaster has more sense than his wife. Did you never talk to him about the missing deed?"

"We had words," Mrs. Lear said with emphasis. " 'Course he stood up fer his wife—said she'd never do such a thing. But I know better!"

"Yet since the deed disappeared no one has tried to put you off your land."

"That's cause the Burmasters are waitin' their chance. Oh, they're sly and cunning. But I'm jest as smart as they are, and they'll never git me off this place!"

The discussion, Penny felt, was traveling in the same familiar circle. One could not influence Mrs. Lear. Her mind had been made up. Nothing would move her.

Thinking that they might at least talk matters over with Mr. Burmaster, the girls presently walked down the road to Sleepy Hollow estate. A workman who

was busy with hammer and saw told them that Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster had motored to Delta for the afternoon.

"What are you building?" Penny inquired curiously. "A gate?"

"You might call it that," he grinned. "Mr. Burmaster ordered me to knock together a couple of 'em, one for each end of the bridge."

"Oh! I see!" Light dawned upon Penny. "Moveable barriers to trap the Headless Horseman prankster!"

"It's a lot o' nonsense if you ask me," the workman grumbled. "That fellow ain't been around here in a week. Reckon he may never show up again."

"Yet Mr. Burmaster keeps watch of the bridge?"

"Every night. That wife of his wouldn't give him no peace if he didn't." The workman hammered a nail into place and added: "The Burmasters have got something to worry about if they only had sense enough to realize it."

"You mean the Huntley Dam?"

The workman nodded. "I'm quittin' here tonight," he confessed. "Maybe that dam will hold, but I'm takin' no chances!"

Penny and Louise were even more troubled as they walked back to Mrs. Lear's home. A fine supper awaited them. They scarcely did justice to it and

found it difficult to respond to the old lady's cheerful conversation.

"She just doesn't seem to realize that she's in any danger," Louise whispered despairingly to her chum as they did the dishes together.

"Oh, she knows," Penny replied. "But Mrs. Lear is set in her ways. I doubt anyone can induce her to take to the hills."

After the dishes had been put away, the girls played card games with the old lady. Promptly at nine o'clock Mrs. Lear announced that it was bed time. As she locked up the doors for the night she stood for a time on the back porch, staring thoughtfully at the clouds.

"It looks like rain again," Penny remarked.

Mrs. Lear said nothing. She closed the door firmly and turned the key.

Once in their bedroom, the girls undressed quickly and blew out the light. For awhile they could hear Mrs. Lear moving about on the bare floor of her own room. Then the house became quiet.

"I'll be glad when we're home again," Louise whispered, snuggling down under the quilts. "Think how wet we'd get if that dam should break tonight!"

"Stop talking about it or you'll give me nightmares!" Penny chided. "Let's go to sleep."

Try as they would, the girls could not settle down.

First Penny would twist and turn and then Louise would do her share of squirming. Finally just as they were beginning to feel drowsy, they were startled to hear a drumming sound on the tin roof above their heads.

"What was that?" Louise muttered, sitting up.

The sounds were coming faster and faster now.

"Rain!" Penny exclaimed.

Jumping out of bed, she went to the window. Already the panes were splashed and rivulets were chasing one another to the sill.

"If this isn't the worst luck yet!" she muttered. "It looks like a hard rain too."

Louise joined her chum at the window. Disheartened, they gazed toward the woods and the hills. Ominous warnings arose in their minds to plague them. With an added burden of water could the dam hold? Sleep seemed out of the question. Wrapping blankets about them, the girls drew chairs to the window and watched.

Then as suddenly as the rain had started, it ceased. A moon struggled through a jagged gap of the clouds. The woods and the barn became discernible once more.

"Rain's over," Louise said, covering a yawn. "Let's go to bed, Penny."

Penny gathered up the quilts from the floor. But as she turned away from the window, an object out-

side the house captured her attention. For an instant she thought that she was mistaken. Then she gripped Louise's hand, pulling her back to the sill.

"What is it?" Louise asked in bewilderment.

"Look over there!" Penny commanded.

From the woods across the road the girls could see a moving light.

"Someone with a lantern," Louise said indifferently.

"Watch!" Penny commanded again.

Even as she spoke, the lantern was waved in a half circle from side to side. The strange movement was repeated several times.

"What do you make of it?" Louise whispered in awe.

"I suspect someone is trying to signal this house," Penny replied soberly. "Let's keep quiet and see what we can learn."

CHAPTER

15

INTO THE WOODS

FOR SEVERAL minutes nothing very spectacular happened. At intervals the strange lantern signals were repeated.

"It looks to me as if that person over in the woods is trying to signal someone here!" Penny said, peering from behind the window curtain.

"Mrs. Lear?" asked Louise.

"Who else? Certainly no one would have reason to try to attract our attention."

"But why should anyone come here tonight?"

As the girls speculated upon the meaning of the mysterious signals, they heard a door at the end of the hall softly open. Footsteps padded noiselessly past their door.

"Are you asleep, girls?" Mrs. Lear's voice chirped.

Louise would have answered had not Penny clapped a hand firmly over her mouth.

After a moment the footsteps pattered on down the stairway.

"Where can Mrs. Lear be going?" Penny speculated in a whisper. "She wanted to make certain that we were asleep."

The girls did not have long to wait. Soon they heard an outside door close. A moment later they saw the spry old lady crossing the yard to the barn. She was fully dressed and wore a grotesque tight-waisted jacket as protection against the biting night wind.

Penny turned her gaze toward the woods once more. The lantern signals had ceased.

"What do you think is going on?" Louise asked in bewilderment.

Penny reached for her clothing which had been left in an untidy heap on the floor. "I don't know," she replied grimly. "With luck we'll find out."

They dressed as quickly as they could. As Penny was pulling on her shoes she heard the barn door close. She rushed to the window. Old Lady Lear, riding with an easy grace that belied her years, was walking Trinidad toward the road.

"Now where's she going?" Penny demanded, seizing Louise by the hand. "Come on, or we'll never learn!"

Clattering down the stairs, they reached the yard in time to see Mrs. Lear riding into the woods.

"Know what I think?" Louise asked breathlessly. "She's the one who's been pulling off these Headless Horseman stunts!"

"Someone signaled to her from the woods," Penny reminded her chum. "She's starting off to meet whoever flashed the lantern!"

To attempt to follow the old lady afoot seemed a foolish thing to do. Nevertheless, Penny was convinced that Mrs. Lear would not ride far into the woods. She argued that a golden opportunity would be lost forever if they did not try to learn where she went.

"Then come on if we must do it!" Louise consented. "It won't be easy to keep her in sight though."

In their haste the girls had provided themselves with no light. Nor had they imagined that a night could be so dark. Once among the trees they had difficulty in keeping to the trail that old Mrs. Lear had chosen.

"Let's turn back," Louise pleaded. "We're apt to get lost."

Penny, however, was stubbornly determined to learn the old lady's destination. Though she could not see Trinidad she could hear the crashing of underbrush only a short distance ahead.

"Penny, I can't keep on!" Louise gasped a moment later. "I'm winded."

"You're scared," Penny amended. "Well, so am I. But it's just as easy to go on now as it is to turn back."

The trail Mrs. Lear had taken led at a steep angle uphill. The old lady allowed her horse to take his time. Even so, the girls were hard pressed to keep fairly close.

"Listen!" Penny presently commanded in a whisper.

No longer could they hear the sound of Trinidad's hoofbeats.

"We've lost her," Louise said anxiously.

"I think Mrs. Lear has stopped," Penny replied, keeping her voice low. "Perhaps she heard us and suspects that we followed her."

More cautiously than before, the girls moved forward. It was well that they did, for unexpectedly they came to a brook and a clearing. Mrs. Lear had dismounted and tied Trinidad to an elm tree close to the water's edge.

Huddling behind a clump of bushes, the girls waited and watched. Mrs. Lear did not appear to be expecting anyone. She gave Trinidad a friendly pat. Then making certain that he was securely fastened to the tree, walked briskly toward the girls.

Penny and Louise cringed closer to the ground. The old lady passed them and went on down the trail.

"You stay here and keep watch of Trinidad!" Penny instructed. "I'll follow Mrs. Lear."

Louise did not want to remain alone. She started to say so, but Penny was gone.

The moment her chum had vanished from sight, sheer panic took possession of Louise. An owl hooted. The cry sent icy chills racing down the girl's spine.

Tensely she listened. She was certain she could hear footsteps approaching the brook. Suddenly she lost all interest in solving the mystery. Her one desire was to get safely out of the woods. Shamelessly, she turned and fled.

Penny, doggedly following Mrs. Lear, was startled to hear a crashing of the bushes behind her. As she paused, Louise came running up.

"What is it?" Penny demanded. "Did someone come for Trinidad?"

"I don't know, and I don't care!" Louise answered grimly. "Call me a coward if you like—I'll not stay by myself!"

Penny did not chide her chum, though she was disappointed. A moment's thought convinced her that since Louise was unwilling to remain by the brook, it now would be better for them both to trail Mrs. Lear. If they were not to lose her, they must hasten along.

"Where do you think the old lady is going?" Louise presently asked as they stumbled over a vine-clogged trail. "Not back home."

"No," Penny agreed in a whisper, "we're going in the wrong direction for that."

Unexpectedly, the girls emerged into a clearing. Not daring to cross the open space lest Mrs. Lear see them, they huddled at the fringe of trees. Overhead, dark clouds scudded and boiled; a strengthening wind whipped their clothing about them.

Mrs. Lear moved spryly across the open space. Pausing near the edge of a cliff, she crouched beside a huge boulder. Grasping a bush for support, she peered down into the valley.

"We may be directly above Sleepy Hollow estate!" Penny whispered excitedly. "Let's try to get closer and see!"

Treading cautiously over the sodden leaves, the girls made a wide circle along the edge of trees. Keeping a safe distance from Mrs. Lear, they peered down over the rim of the valley. As Penny had guessed, Sleepy Hollow was to be seen below. A light, dimly visible, burned on the lower floor of the dwelling. They barely were able to discern the long, narrow bridge spanning the mill pond.

"Now why do you suppose Mrs. Lear came here at this time of night?" Louise speculated. "Do you think—"

Penny gave her chum a quick little jab. From far away she had caught the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

"The Headless Horseman!" Louise whispered in awe.

"We'll soon see. Mrs. Lear is waiting for something!"

Minutes elapsed. Penny began to doubt that she had heard an approaching horseman. Then suddenly he emerged from a thicket that edged the valley road. The rider was garbed in white which plainly silhouetted his huge, misshapen body. Where his head should have been there was nothing.

The sight of such an apparition did not seem to dismay old Mrs. Lear. The old lady leaned farther over the cliff, fairly hugging herself with delight.

Having gained the road leading to Sleepy Hollow, the horseman came on at a swift pace. Sparks flew from the steel shod hoofs as they clipped smartly on the stones.

Penny's gaze swept ahead of the ghost rider to the bridge. Her heart leaped. Even as the horseman rode onto the structure, workmen sprang from the thickets at either side of the road. High wooden barriers were jerked into place at both ends of the bridge. The Headless Horseman's retreat was cut off.

"They've got him!" Penny whispered tensely. "He's trapped on the bridge!"

The horse faltered for an instant and slackened speed. Then as the mysterious rider apparently urged him on, he bore down on the barrier blocking the bridge's exit.

"He's going to try to jump!" Louise murmured. "But no one could take such a high barrier!"

Nervously the girls watched. By this time they were certain that the horse was Trinidad. Magnificent though he was, age had crept upon him, and the wooden gate could prove a difficult test for a trained jumper.

If Penny and Louise were tense, Mrs. Lear was even more so. "Take it, Trinidad!" they heard her mutter. "Over!"

Trinidad did not falter. Approaching the barrier at full tilt, he gathered his strength, and cleared the structure in a beautiful, clean leap. The startled workmen, amazed at the feat, fell back out of the way. Only one made any attempt to stop the rider. The Headless Horseman plunged his gallant steed through a gap in the trees and was gone.

"You did it Trinidad!" cackled Mrs. Lear. "You showed 'em!"

Stooping to pick up a pebble, the old lady hurled it contemptuously toward the bridge. Her aim though carelessly taken was surprisingly good. The stone fell with a loud, resounding thud on the bridge planks.

"Let 'em wonder where that came from!" the old lady chuckled gleefully. "Let 'em wonder."

Wrapping her black coat about her, she quickly retreated into the woods.

CHAPTER

16

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

"WE'LL GIVE Mrs. Lear a little start and then follow," Penny instructed. "Undoubtedly she'll return to the brook to meet the Headless Horseman."

"Then you believe she's been behind the scheme from the first?" Louise asked, backing away from the cliff's crumbling edge. Below, on the grounds of Sleepy Hollow, men roved about with lighted lanterns. Apparently no very vigorous effort was being made to pursue the mysterious rider into the woods.

"Who else?" Penny countered. "At least she's been a party to it."

"But she's not actually the rider. We know that."

"She certainly knows the identity of the man," Penny said with conviction. "And we should too before the night's over. Come on!"

Fearful lest Mrs. Lear get too much of a start, the girls set off in pursuit. However, they had not gone far before they realized that the old lady was not re-

turning to the brook. Instead she seemed to be heading for home.

"We didn't figure this so well after all!" Penny observed in deep disgust. "Now it's too late to go back to the brook, so we've lost our chance to learn who the fellow is."

"Maybe not," Louise said cheerfully. "Someone will have to bring Trinidad home."

They had now reached the main road with Mrs. Lear's cabin visible over the hill. Not once glancing over her shoulder, the old lady trod a muddy path to her own gate. Once inside the grounds, she peered up at the windows of the bedroom Penny and Louise had occupied. Satisfied that no light was burning, she quietly entered the house.

The two girls waited for awhile in the woods. They thought it wise to give the old lady ample time to go to bed and fall asleep.

"Come on, we've waited long enough," Penny said at last.

They crossed the road and stole to the front door. To their astonishment it was locked. The back door also was fastened from the inside.

"We'll have to try a window," Penny proposed.

The windows also were locked or so stuck by dampness that they could not be budged.

"If this isn't a pretty mess!" Penny exclaimed impatiently. "Mrs. Lear never used to lock anything.

She must have started doing it since the deed to her property disappeared."

"What are we going to do? Sleep in the barn?"

"That might not be such a bad idea. Then if Trinidad ever comes home we'd be able to see who rode him!"

"You'll have to get another idea!" Louise retorted. "That old barn has rats and mice. I wouldn't sleep there for a million dollars."

Penny circled the house, searching for a way out of the difficulty. She could find no ladder. A rose trellis rising along the front wall suggested that if they could use it to reach the second story, they might creep along the porch roof to their own room. There at least, the window had been left unlocked.

"It looks flimsy," Penny said, testing the structure. "I'll try it first."

Gingerly she climbed the trellis, trying to avoid the thorns of a withered rose plant. She reached the porch roof and skillfully rolled onto it. From there she motioned for her chum to follow.

Louise was heavier than Penny and less adept at climbing. The rose bush tore at her clothing and wounded her arms. Just as she was reaching for Penny's outstretched hand one of the cross pieces gave way. Startled, Louise let out a scream of terror.

"Now you've done it!" Penny muttered, pulling

her by brute force onto the porch. "Mrs. Lear's deaf if she didn't hear that!"

Tiptoeing with frantic haste across the porch roof, they tested the window of their bedroom. It raised easily. But as they scrambled over the sill, the girls were dismayed to hear Mrs. Lear's door open farther down the hall.

"She heard us!" Louise whispered tensely. "Now what'll we do?"

"Into bed and cover up!" Penny ordered.

Not even taking time to remove their shoes, they made a dive for the big four-poster bed. Scarcely had they pulled the coverlet up to their ears than they heard Mrs. Lear just outside the door.

"Are you all right?" she called anxiously. "I thought I heard a scream."

The girls did not answer. They closed their eyes and pretended to be asleep. Mrs. Lear opened the door and peeped inside. Not entirely satisfied she crossed the room and stood for a moment at the open window. Closing it half way, she then tiptoed out the door.

"Was that a close call!" Penny whispered, sitting up in bed. "Lucky for us she didn't notice anything wrong."

Waiting a few minutes longer, the girls slid from beneath the covers and quickly undressed.

"At least we learned one important thing tonight," Penny observed, quietly lowering a shoe to the floor. "Mrs. Lear is behind this Headless Horseman escapade. But who is the fellow?"

"Silas Malcom perhaps. Only he's a bit too old for pranks."

Penny did not reply. Moving to the window, she gazed thoughtfully toward the barn.

"Someone may bring Trinidad back," she commented. "By watching—"

"Not for me," Louise cut in. She rolled back into bed. "I'm going to get myself a little shut-eye before dawn."

Penny drew a chair up to the window. The room was cold. Her chair was straight-backed and hard. Minutes dragged by and still Trinidad did not put in an appearance.

"The horse may not come back tonight," Penny thought, covering a yawn. "Guess I'll jump into bed. I can hear just as well from there."

She snuggled in beside Louise and enjoyed the warmth of the covers. A delightful drowsiness took possession of her. Though she struggled to stay awake, her eyelids became heavier and heavier.

Presently Penny slept. She slept soundly. When she awakened, the first rays of morning light were seeping in through the window. But it was not the sun that had aroused her from slumber. As she stirred

drowsily, she became aware of an unusual sound. At first she could not place it. Then she realized that someone was pounding on the downstairs screen door.

Penny nudged Louise. When that did not arouse her, she gave her a vigorous shake.

"What now?" Louise mumbled crossly.

"Wake up! Someone's downstairs pounding on the screen door."

"Let 'em pound." Louise rolled away from her chum's grasp and tried to go back to sleep.

The thumping noise was repeated, louder and more insistent. Penny was sure she heard the rumble of many voices. Thoroughly puzzled, she swung out of bed and reached for a robe.

"Open up!" called a man's voice from below.

Penny ran to the window. The porch roof half obstructed her view, but in the yard she could see at least half a dozen men. Others were at the door, hammering to be let in.

By this time the thumpings had thoroughly awakened Louise. She too deserted the bed and went to the window.

"Something's wrong!" she exclaimed. "Just see that mob of men! I'll warrant they're here to make trouble for Mrs. Lear—perhaps because of what happened last night!"

CHAPTER

17

ACCUSATIONS

PENNY AND Louise scrambled into their clothes. As they pulled on their shoes, they heard Mrs. Lear going down the hall. Fearful lest she encounter trouble, they hastened to overtake her before she reached the front door.

"Do you think it's safe to let those men in?" Penny ventured dubiously.

"Why shouldn't I open the door?" Mrs. Lear demanded. "I've nothing to hide."

She gazed sharply at Penny, who suddenly was at a loss for words.

Mrs. Lear swung wide the door to face the group of men on the porch. Joe Quigley was there and so was Silas Malcom. Seeing friends, Penny and Louise felt reassured.

"Well?" demanded Mrs. Lear, though not in an unfriendly tone. "What's the meaning of waking a body up in the middle o' the night?"

"Word just came in by radio," Joe Quigley spoke up. "There's been a big rain over Goshen way."

"I could have told you that last night," Mrs. Lear replied, undisturbed. "Knew it when I seen them big clouds bilin' up."

"You oughter get out o' here right away," added Silas Malcom. "That dam at Huntley Lake ain't safe no more, and when all that water comes down from Goshen it ain't too likely she'll hold."

"Are the people of Delta leaving for the hills?" Mrs. Lear asked coldly.

"Some are," Quigley assured her. "We're urging everyone who can to take the morning train. A few stubborn ones like yourself refuse to budge."

"Oh, so I'm stubborn! I suppose you're leaving, Joe Quigley?"

"That's different. I have a job to do and I can't desert my post at the depot."

"And the Burmasters? Are they leaving?"

"We're on our way up to the estate now to warn them."

"I'll make you a bargain," Mrs. Lear agreed, a hard glint in her eye. "If Mrs. Burmaster goes, then I'll go too. But so long as she stays in this valley I'm not stirrin' one inch!"

"You're both as stubborn as one of Silas' mules!" Joe Quigley said impatiently. "Don't you realize that your life is in danger?"

"When you've lived as long as I have, young man, life ain't so precious as some other things."

"If you won't listen to reason yourself, what about these girls?" Quigley turned toward Penny and Louise.

Mrs. Lear's face became troubled. "They'll have to go at once," she decided. "What time's that train out o' Delta?"

"Eleven-forty," Joe Quigley replied. "Or they can catch it at Witch Falls at eleven. Getting on at that station they might find seats."

"We'll pack our things right away," Louise promised, starting for the stairs.

Penny followed reluctantly. Though she realized that it would be foolhardy to remain, she did not want to leave Red Valley. Particularly she disliked to desert old Mrs. Lear.

"If Mrs. Lear is determined to stay here, what can we do about it?" Louise argued reasonably. "You know our folks wouldn't want us to remain."

The girls quickly gathered their belongings together and went downstairs again. To their surprise Mrs. Lear had put on her coat and was preparing to accompany the men to Sleepy Hollow.

"I ain't leavin' fer good," she announced, observing Penny's astonished gaze. "Leastwise, not unless the Burmasters do. I'm going there now to see what they've got to say."

"Come along if you like," one of the men invited the girls. "Maybe you can help persuade them to leave the valley."

Penny and Louise doubted that they would be of any assistance whatsoever. However, it was several hours before train time, so they were very glad indeed to ride in one of the cars to Sleepy Hollow estate. At the crossroad Joe Quigley turned back to Delta for he was scheduled to go on duty at the railroad station. The others kept on until they reached the estate.

Silas Malcom rapped sharply on the front door. In a moment a light went on in an upstairs room. A few minutes later a window opened and Mr. Burmaster, clad in pajamas, peered down.

"What's wanted?" he demanded angrily.

"There's been a big rain above us," he was told. "Everyone's being advised to get out while there's time."

Mr. Burmaster was silent a moment. Then he said: "Wait a minute until I dress. We'll talk about it."

Ten minutes elapsed before the estate owner opened the front door and bade the group enter. He led the party into a luxuriously furnished living room.

"Now what is all this?" Mr. Burmaster asked. "We had one disturbance here last night and it seems to me that's about enough."

Silas Malcom explained the situation, speaking quietly but with force.

"And who says that the dam won't hold?" Mr. Burmaster interrupted.

"Well, it's the opinion of them that's been workin' on it for the past two weeks. If we'd had money and enough help—"

"So that's why you rooted me out of bed!"

"We came here to do you a favor!" one of the men retorted angrily. "It's too late to save the dam unless nature sees fit to spare her. But it ain't too late for you and your household to get out of here."

"I have two hundred thousand dollars sunk in this place."

"That's a heap o' money," Silas said thoughtfully. "But it ain't going to mean anything to you if that dam lets go. You ought to leave here without waitin'."

"Perhaps you're right," Mr. Burmaster said, pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace. "It was my judgment that the dam would hold. Naturally no one could predict these heavy, unseasonable rains."

A door opened. Everyone turned to see Mrs. Burmaster on the threshold. Her hair was uncombed and she wore a brilliant red housecoat.

"Who are these people?" she asked her husband in a cold voice.

"Villagers. They've come to warn us that we ought to leave here."

"Warn us, indeed!" Mrs. Burmaster retorted bitterly. "I don't know what they've said to you, but it's just another scheme to get us away from here! Haven't they tried everything?"

"This ain't no Headless Horseman scare, Ma'am," spoke Silas Malcom. "The Huntley dam is likely to give way at any minute."

"I've heard that for weeks!" Mrs. Burmaster's gaze was scornful. "Oh, I know you've hated us ever since we built this house! You've tried every imaginable trick to make us leave."

"That ain't true, ma'am," Silas replied soberly.

Mrs. Burmaster's angry gaze swept the group and came to rest on Mrs. Lear.

"That old witch who lives down the road has set you all against me!" she fairly screamed. "She's lied and fought me at every turn!"

Mrs. Lear detached herself from the group. She spoke quietly but with suppressed fury.

"I've stood a lot from you in the past, Mrs. Burmaster," she retorted. "But there ain't no one alive can call me a witch!"

"Oh, I can't?" Mrs. Burmaster mocked. "Well, you're worse than an old witch!"

"At least I ain't a sneak thief! I don't go breakin' into folks' houses to steal the deed to their property!"

"How dare you accuse me of such a thing!"

"Because I know you got the deed to my cabin right here in the house!" Mrs. Lear accused. "You've got it hid away!"

"That's a lie!"

"Ladies! Ladies!" remonstrated one of the men from the village.

Mrs. Lear paid not the slightest heed. Advancing toward Mrs. Burmaster, she waved a bony finger at her.

"So it's a lie, is it?" she cackled. "Well, let me tell you this! Mary Gibson that worked out here as maid until last Wednesday saw that deed o' mine in your bureau drawer. She told me herself!"

"How dare you say such a thing!" gasped Mrs. Burmaster.

Mr. Burmaster stepped between his wife and Mrs. Lear.

"Enough of this!" he said firmly. "We know nothing about the deed to your property, Mrs. Lear."

"Then prove that it ain't here!" the old lady challenged. "Look in your wife's bureau drawer and see!"

"Certainly. Since you have made such an accusation we shall by all means disprove it."

As Mr. Burmaster started toward the circular stairway, his wife caught nervously at his arm.

"No, John! Don't be so weak as to give in to her!"

"Mrs. Lear has made a very serious accusation against you. We must prove to all these people that she misjudged you."

"You can't search—you mustn't! It's insulting to me!"

"But my dear—"

"I'll never speak to you again if you do! Never!"

Mr. Burmaster hesitated, not knowing what to do. "So you're afraid to look?" Mrs. Lear needled him.

"No, I'm not afraid," the estate owner said with sudden decision. "Furthermore, I want someone to accompany me as witness." His gaze swept the little group and singled out Penny. "Will you come?"

Penny did not wish to be drawn into the feud, but as the others urged her to accompany Mr. Burmaster, she reluctantly agreed.

Mrs. Burmaster's bedroom was a luxurious chamber directly above the living room. There was a canopied bed with beautiful hangings and a dressing table that fairly took Penny's breath away.

"There's the bureau," said Mr. Burmaster, pointing to another massive piece of furniture. "Suppose you search."

Rather reluctantly, Penny opened the top drawer. It was filled with lace handkerchiefs, and neat boxes of stockings. The second drawer contained silk lingerie while the third was filled with odds and ends.

"So it's not there!" Mr. Burmaster exclaimed in relief as Penny straightened from her task. "I was sure it wouldn't be!"

From the tone of his voice it was evident that he had been very much afraid the deed would be found. Penny's eyes wandered toward the dressing table.

"You may as well search there too," Mr. Burmaster said. "Then there can be no further accusations."

One by one Penny opened the drawers of the dressing table. Mrs. Burmaster's jewel box caught her eye. It was filled to overflowing with bracelets, pins, and valuable necklaces. Just behind the big silver box, another object drew her attention. At a glance she knew that it was a legal document. As she picked it up she saw that it was the deed to Mrs. Lear's property.

"What's that?" Mr. Burmaster demanded sharply when Penny did not speak.

Without answering, she gave him the document.

"It is the deed!" he exclaimed, dumbfounded. "Then my wife did steal it from Mrs. Lear! But why—why would she do such a thing?"

"I'm sure she didn't realize—"

"Mrs. Burmaster is a sick woman, a very sick woman," the estate owner said unhappily. "But what must I do?"

"What can you do except go downstairs and tell the truth?"

"Face them all? Admit that my wife is a thief?"

"It seems to me that the only honorable thing is to return the deed to Mrs. Lear."

"The deed must be returned," Mr. Burmaster acknowledged. "But not tonight—later."

"I realize that you wish to protect your wife," Penny said quietly. "It's natural. But Mrs. Lear has to be considered."

"I'll pay you handsomely to keep quiet about this," Mr. Burmaster said. "Furthermore, I'll promise to return the deed to Mrs. Lear tomorrow."

Penny shook her head.

"Very well then," Mr. Burmaster sighed. "I suppose I must face them. I don't mind for myself. It's my wife I'm worried about. She's apt to go into hysterics."

Tramping down the stairs, the estate owner confronted the little group of villagers. In a few words he acknowledged that the deed had been found, apologized to Mrs. Lear, and placed the document in her hands. Throughout the speech Mrs. Burmaster stood as one stricken. Her face flushed as red as the robe she wore, then became deathly white.

"I thank you, Mr. Burmaster, you're an honorable man," Mrs. Lear said stiffly. "I feel mighty sorry fer the way things turned out. Maybe—"

"Oh, yes, everyone can see that you're sorry!" Mrs. Burmaster broke in shrilly. "You're a hateful, schem-

ing old hag. Now get out of my house! Get out all of you and never come back!"

"About the dam—" Silas Malcom started to say.

"The dam!" Mrs. Burmaster screamed. "Let it break! I wish it would! Then I'd never see any of you again! Go on—get out! Do you hear me? Get out!"

The little group retreated toward the door. Mrs. Burmaster did not wait to see the villagers leave. Weeping hysterically, she ran from the room.

CHAPTER

18

FLOOD WATERS

RAIN SPLATTERED steadily against the car windows as the noon passenger train pulled from the Witch Falls station. Penny and Louise watched the plump drops join into fat rivulets which raced one another to the sill. Since saying goodbye to Mrs. Lear, Silas Malcom, and their other valley friends, they had not done much talking. They felt too discouraged.

"I wish we'd decided to catch the train at Delta," Penny remarked, settling herself for the long ride home. "Then we could have said goodbye to Joe Quigley. "We'll be passing through the station soon."

Louise nodded morosely.

"Things certainly ended in one grand mess," she commented. "Mrs. Lear got the deed to her property back, but the feud will be worse than ever now. Furthermore, we never did solve the Headless Horseman mystery—not that it matters."

Reaching for a discarded newspaper which lay on

the coach seat, Penny shot her chum a quick, knowing look.

"Just what does that mean?" Louise demanded alertly.

Penny pretended not to understand.

"You gave me one of those wise-owl looks!" Louise accused. "Just as if you *had* solved the mystery."

"I assure you I haven't, and never will now that we're leaving the valley."

"But you do have an idea who was back of the scheme?"

"Mrs. Lear, of course. We saw that much with our own eyes."

"But we didn't learn who actually rode the horse. Or did you?"

"Not exactly."

"You do know then!"

"No," Penny denied soberly. "I noticed something about the rider that made me think—but then I'd better not say it."

"Please go on."

"No, I have no proof. It would only be a guess."

"I think you're mean to keep me in the dark," Louise pouted.

"Maybe I'll tell you my theory later," Penny replied, opening the newspaper. "Just now, I'm not in the mood."

Both girls had been strangely depressed by their

last few hours in the valley. Mrs. Lear had refused to come with them or to seek refuge in the hills. Gleeful at her victory over Mrs. Burmaster, she had seemed insensible to danger.

"Look at this headline," Penny said, indicating the black type of the newspaper. "FLOOD MENACES RED VALLEY!"

Quickly the girls scanned the story. The account mentioned no facts new to them. It merely repeated that residents of the valley were alarmed by heavy up-state rains which had raised Lake Huntley to a dangerous height behind the dam.

"Wonder if Salt got any good pictures when he was here yesterday?" Penny mused. "Probably not. This is the sort of news story that doesn't amount to much unless the big calamity falls."

"You don't think the dam actually will give way?" Louise asked anxiously.

"How should I know? Even the experts can't agree."

"At any rate we're leaving here, and I'm glad. Somehow, I've had an uneasy feeling ever since last night."

Penny nodded and glanced from the car window again. Rain kept splashing fiercely against the thick pane, half obscuring the distant hills. Along the right of way, muddy water ran in deep torrents, washing fence and hedgerow.

As the train snailed along toward Delta, there was increasing evidence of flood damage. A row of shacks near the railroad tracks was half submerged. Along the creek beds, giant trees bowed their branches to the swirling water. Many landmarks were completely blotted out.

"We're coming into Delta now," Penny presently observed. "Perhaps if we watch sharp we'll see Joe Quigley and can say goodbye."

The train stopped with a jerk while still some distance from the station. Then it pulled to a siding and there it waited. After ten minutes Penny sauntered through the train, thinking that if she could find an open door, she might get out and walk to the depot. Stopping a porter who was passing through the car, she asked him the cause of the delay.

"We'se waitin' fo' ordehs," the colored man answered. "Anyhow, dat's what de cap'n says."

"The captain?"

"The conducteh o' dis heah train."

"Oh! And what does he say about the high water?"

"He says de track between heah and Hobostein's a foot undeh."

"Then that means the river must be coming up fast. Any danger we'll be stranded at Delta?"

"You betteh talk to de conductor," the porter said,

jerking his head toward a fat, bespectacled trainman who had just swung aboard the coach. "Dat's Mr. Johnson."

Penny stopped the conductor to ask him what the chances were of getting through the flooded area.

"Doesn't look so good," he rumbled. "The rails are under at Mile Posts 792 and 825."

"Then we're tied up here?"

"No, we're going as far as we can," the conductor answered. The dispatcher's sending a work train on ahead to feel out the track. But we'll be lucky to make ten miles an hour."

Penny chatted with the conductor for a few minutes, then ambled back to the coach where she had left Louise. The prospects were most discouraging. At best it would be late afternoon before they could hope to reach Riverview.

"I'm starving too," Louise said. "I suppose there's no diner on this train."

As a stop gap the girls hailed a passing vendor and bought candy bars. Having thus satisfied their hunger, they tried to read magazines.

Presently the car started with a jerk. However, instead of proceeding toward the station it backed into the railroad yard.

"Now what?" Penny demanded impatiently. "Aren't we ever going to start?"

The porter hastened through the car, his manner noticeably nervous and tense. He paid no heed to a woman passenger who sought to detain him.

"Something's wrong!" Penny said with conviction.

"A wash-out, do you think?"

"Might be. Let's see what we can learn."

With a vague feeling of foreboding they could not have explained, the girls arose and followed the porter. Something was amiss. They were certain of it.

Losing sight of the colored man, they kept on until they reached the rear platform. Penny started to open the screen door. Just then the train whistle sounded a shrill, unending blast.

Startled, Louise gripped her chum's hand, listening tensely.

In the car behind, they heard the conductor's husky voice. He was shouting: "Run! Run, for your lives! Take to the hills!"

Penny was stunned for an instant. Then seizing Louise's arm, she pulled her out on the train platform. At first glance nothing appeared wrong. The tracks were well above the river level. Between the road bed and a high hill on the left, flood water was running like a mill race, but the ditch was narrow and represented no immediate danger.

"Listen!" Penny cried.

From far away there came a deep, rumbling roar not unlike the sound of distant thunder.

Leaning far over the train platform railing, Penny gazed up the tracks. The sight which met her eyes left her momentarily paralyzed.

Down the valley charged a great wall of water, taking everything before it. Trees had been mowed down. Crushed houses were being carried along like children's blocks. Far up the track a switch engine was lifted bodily from the rails and hurled backwards.

Penny waited to see no more.

"The dam's given away!" she shouted. "Quick, Louise! Climb over the railing and run for your life!"

CHAPTER

19

TRAGEDY

LEAPING OVER the platform railing, Penny held up her arms to assist Louise. Now awakened to danger, her chum scrambled wildly after her only to stop aghast as she beheld the gigantic wall of water rushing toward them.

"Jump the ditch and make for the hill!" Penny ordered tersely. "Be quick!"

Passengers were pouring from the other cars, their terrified cries drowned by the grinding roar of the onrushing torrent. The wall of water moved with incredible speed. It tore into the railroad yard, shattering a tool house and a coal dock. It roared on, sweeping a row of empty box cars into its maw.

Spurred by the sight, Penny and Louise tried to leap the ditch. They fell far short and both plunged into the boiling water up to their arm pits.

Penny's feet anchored solidly. With a gigantic shove, she helped Louise to safety. By swimming

with the current she then reached shore a few yards farther down the railroad right of way.

"Run!" she shouted to the bewildered, bedraggled Louise. "Up the hill!"

Scrambling over the muddy edge of the ditch, she raced after her chum for higher ground. Just then the wall of water swept into the siding. As the train was struck it seemed to shudder from the terrific impact, then slowly settled on its side.

"Horrible!" Louise shuddered. "Some of the passengers may have been trapped in there!"

"Most of them escaped," Penny gasped. "There goes the water tower!"

A building borne by the flood, rammed into the ironwork of the big dripping tower. It crumpled, falling with a great, shuddering splash.

With the back-wash of the flood sloshing against their knees, the girls raced for high ground. Reaching a point midway up the hill where other passengers had paused, they turned to glance below. Yellow, angry water, rising easily ten feet, flowed over the railroad right of way.

With unbelievable speed the flood rolled on. In one angry gulp it reached a long freight train farther down the track. The caboose and a string of coal cars were lifted and hurled. Strangely, the coal tender and engine which had been detached, remained on the rails.

"Oh, look!" Louise gasped in horror. "The engineer's trapped in the cab!"

The trainman, plainly visible, valiantly kept the engine whistle blowing. Higher and higher rose the water. Penny and Louise were certain the courageous man must meet his doom. But the crest of the flood already had swept on down the valley, and in a moment the waters about the engine remained at a standstill.

So quickly had disaster struck that the girls could not immediately comprehend the extent of the tragedy. From their own train nearly all of the passengers had escaped. But the town of Delta had not fared so well. Apparently the flood had roared through the low section, taking all before it. Farther up the valley, directly below Huntley Lake where the gorge was narrow, damage to life and property might be even greater.

"What chance could poor Mrs. Lear have had," Louise said brokenly. "Or the Burmasters."

"There's a possibility they took to the hills in time."

"I doubt it," Louise said grimly. "The flood came so quickly."

Already the yellow, muddy waters were carrying evidence of their work. Houses, many with men and women clinging desperately to rooftops, floated past. Other helpless victims clung to logs, orange crates and chicken coops. At terrific speed they sailed past the

base of the hillside. Several shouted piteously for help.

"We must do something to save those people!" Penny cried desperately.

"What?" Louise asked.

By this time the hillside was dotted with people who had saved themselves. Several of the women were weeping hysterically. Another had fainted. For the most part, everyone stared almost stupidly at the endless stream of debris which was swept down the valley. No one knew how to aid the agonized victims who clung to whatever their fingers could clutch.

On one rooftop, Penny counted six persons. The sight drove her to action.

"If only we had a rope—" she cried, and broke off as her eyes roved up the hillside.

Two hundred yards away stood a farmhouse.

"I'll see if I can get one there!" she cried, darting away.

The hill was steep, the ground soft. Penny's wet clothing impeded her. She tripped over a stone and fell, but scrambling up, ran on. Finally, quite out of breath, she reached the farmhouse. A woman with two small children clinging to her dress, met the girl in the yard.

"Ain't it awful?" she murmured brokenly. "My husband's workin' down at the Brandale Works. Did the flood strike there?"

"It must have spread through all of Delta," Penny answered. "This disaster's going to be frightful unless we can get help quickly. Do you have a telephone?"

"Yes, but it's dead. The wire runs into Delta."

Penny had been afraid of that. She doubted that a single telephone pole had been left standing in the town. Nor was it likely that the other valley cities had 'phone service.

"Do you have a rope?" she asked. "A long one?"

"In the barn. I'll get it."

The woman came back in a moment, a coil of rope over her arm.

"Send some of those poor folks up here," she urged as Penny started away with the rope. "I'll put on a wash boiler of coffee and take care of as many as I can."

Half sliding, Penny descended the steep hillside. During her absence two persons had been rescued from the water by means of an improvised lasso made from torn strips of clothing. Others were drifting past, too far away to be reached.

A woman and a child floated past, clinging to a log. Penny stood ready, the rope coiled neatly at her feet. She took careful aim, knowing that if she missed she would have no second chance.

Penny hurled the rope and it ran free, falling just ahead of the helpless pair. The half-drowned mother

reached with one hand and seized it before it sank beneath the surface.

"Hold on!" Penny shouted. "Don't let go!"

Several men ran to help her. By working together, they were able to pull the woman and her child to safety.

Abandoning the rope to skilled hands, Penny rounded the hill to a point providing a clear view of the flooded railroad yard. The roundhouse, the coal chutes and the signal tower were gone. But her heart leaped to see that the station was still standing. Built on high ground it was surrounded with water which did not appear to be deep.

Penny turned to Louise who had followed her. Just then they both heard someone shout that the railroad bridge was being swept away. They saw the massive steel structure swing slowly from its stone foundation. One side held firm which immediately set up great swirling currents. Any persons carried that way would be faced with destruction in the whirling pools of water.

"It's too late to warn the towns directly below Delta!" Penny gasped. "But there still may be time to get a message through to Hobostein. In any case, we must get help here!"

"But how?" Louise asked hopelessly. "Any wires that were left standing must have been torn away when the bridge went."

Penny gazed again toward the Delta depot. Between it and the hillside ran a fast-moving stretch of water, yet separated from the main body of the racing flood.

"If only I could get over to the station, I might somehow send a message!"

"Don't be crazy!" Louise remonstrated. "You haven't a chance to cross that stretch of water!"

"I think I could. I'm a pretty fair swimmer."

"But the current is so swift."

"There's a certain amount of risk," Penny admitted soberly. "But we can't stand here and wait. Someone must do something to bring help."

"Don't do it, Penny!" Louise pleaded. "Please!"

Penny hesitated, but only for an instant. She understood perfectly that if she misjudged the strength of the current it would sweep her down—perhaps carry her along into the main body of water. Once in the grip of that angry torrent, no one could hope to battle against it.

The risk, however, was one she felt she must take. Struggling free from Louise's clinging hands, she kicked off her shoes and tucked up her skirt. Then she plunged into the swirling water.

CHAPTER

20

EMERGENCY CALL

THE CURRENT was much swifter than Penny had anticipated. It tugged viciously at her feet, giving her no opportunity to inch her way along the ditch. A dozen steps and she was beyond her depth, fighting desperately to keep from being swept with the current.

Although a strong swimmer, Penny found herself no match for the wild torrent. Only by going with it could she keep her head above water. To attempt to swim against it was impossible. Despairingly, she saw that she would miss the railroad station by many yards.

"I'll be swept into the main body of the flood!" she thought in panic. "I shouldn't have attempted it!"

Too late she tried to turn back toward the hillside. The swift current held her relentlessly. Struggling against it, her head went under. She choked as she breathed water, then fought her way to the surface again. The current carried her on.

After that first moment of panic, Penny did not waste her strength uselessly. Allowing the flood to carry her along, she took only a few slow strokes, swimming just enough to keep from being pulled beneath the surface. As calmly as she could she appraised the situation.

The station now was very close. Scarcely fifty yards separated her from it, but she knew her physcial powers. Her strength was no match for that racing, swirling, debris-studded current. She could not hope to span the distance, short though it was.

Penny despaired. And then her heart leaped with new hope. Directly ahead, a foot and a half above the water's murky surface, rose a steel rod with red and green signal targets. She recognized the object as a switch stand, used by trainmen to open and close the passing track switch.

"If I could reach that steel rod I could hold on!" she thought. "But do I have the strength?"

The swift current swept Penny on toward the upright rod. She took three, four powerful strokes and reached frantically for the standard. Her fingers closed around the metal. The swift flowing water whipped her violently, but she held fast. Drawing herself close to the rod, she shoved her feet downward. Still she could find no bottom.

Hopefully, Penny glanced toward the station, now less than twenty-five yards away. Although water

completely surrounded the squat little building, it had not risen to the window level. Yet there was no sign of anyone near the place—no one to help her.

Still clinging to the rod, she groped again with her bare feet. This time she located a steel rail. By standing on it, she raised herself a few inches and found firm footing. Suddenly an idea came to her.

"If I shove off hard from this rail, maybe I can get enough momentum to carry me through the current! If I fail—"

Penny decided not to think about that. Releasing her hold on the rod, she pushed off with all her strength and began to swim. Digging her face into the water, she held her breath and put everything she had into each stroke. Pull, pull, pull—she had to keep on. Her breath was nearly gone, strength fast was deserting her. Yet to turn her head and gulp air might spell defeat when victory was near. She could feel the torrent swinging her downstream. She made a final, desperate spurt.

"I can't make it!" she thought. "I can't!"

Yet she struggled on. Then suddenly her churning feet struck a solid object. It was the brick platform of the station!

Raising her head, she saw the building loom up in front of her. The current no longer tugged at her body. She had reached quiet water.

Penny stood still a moment, regaining her breath.

Then she waded to the front door of the station. It could not be opened. Penny pounded and shouted. Her cries went unanswered.

"The place is deserted!" she thought with a sinking heart. "Joe Quigley must have taken to the hills when the flood came."

Slowly Penny waded around the building, unwilling to acknowledge failure. Somehow she had to get word of the disaster through to the outside world. Yet even if she did get inside the station, she was far from certain it would do any good. Telephone wires undoubtedly were down.

Penny made a complete circuit of the depot without seeing anyone. Sick with disappointment, she paused beside the glass-enclosed bay of the ticket office and peered inside. She could see no one. But as she pressed her face against the pane of glass she thought she heard the chatter of a telegraph instrument.

"That means there still must be a wire connection!" she thought hopefully.

Nearby, the flood had lodged a small board against the depot wall. Seizing it, Penny smashed the lower pane of glass with one well-aimed blow.

She scrambled through the opening, crawled over the operator's table and dropped to the floor. The little ticket office was deserted though Joe Quigley's hat still lay on the counter.

"If only I knew how to telegraph!" Penny despaired, hearing again the chatter of the instrument. "Just knowing Morse code won't help me much."

The telegraph sounder was signaling the station call for Delta: "D-A, D-A, D-A. Over and over it was repeated.

Penny hesitated and then went to the instrument. She opened the key and answered with the station call, "D-A."

"Where have you been for the past twenty minutes?" the train dispatcher sent angrily at top speed. "What's happened to No. 17?"

Penny got only part of the message and guessed at the rest. Nervously, at very slow speed, she tapped out in Morse code that the train had been washed off the track.

The dispatcher's next message came very slowly, disclosing that he knew from Penny's style of sending that he was talking to an amateur telegrapher.

"Where's Joe Quigley?" he asked in code.

"Don't know," Penny tapped again. "Station's half under water. Can you send help?"

"Shoot me the facts straight," came the terse order.

Penny described what had happened at Huntley Dam and told how the railroad bridge had washed out. In return the dispatcher assured her that a relief crew would be sent without delay.

"Stay on the job until relieved," was his final order.

Weak with excitement, Penny leaned back in her chair. Help actually was on the way! The dispatcher would notify the proper authorities and set in motion the wheels of various relief organizations. For the moment she had done all she could.

She listened tensely as the dispatcher's crisp call flashed over the wire. He was notifying stations farther up the line to hold all trains running into the valley. Repeatedly Penny heard the call "W-F" which she took to be Witch Falls. It went unanswered.

Half sick with dread, she waited, hoping for a response. It was likely, almost a certainty that the station had been swept away, for the town would have been squarely in the path of the flood. What had happened to old Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters? Penny tried not to think about it.

Unexpectedly, the outside office door opened. Joe Quigley, bedraggled and haggard, one arm hanging limp at his side, splashed toward the desk. Seeing Penny, he stopped short, yet seemed too dazed to question the girl's presence in the inner office.

"It's awful," he mumbled. "I was on the station platform when I saw that wall of water coming. Tried to warn the men in the roundhouse. Before I could cross the tracks, it was too late. One terrific crash and the roundhouse disappeared—"

"You're hurt," Penny cried as the agent reeled

against the wall. "Your arm is crushed. How did it happen?"

"Don't know," Joe admitted, sinking into a chair the girl offered. "I was knocked off my feet. Came to lying in a pile of boards that had snagged against a tree trunk." He stared at Penny as if really seeing her for the first time. "Say," he demanded, "how did you get in here?"

"Smashed the window. It was the only way."

The agent got to his feet, staggering toward the telegraph desk.

"I've got to send a message," he said jerkily. "No. 30's due at Rodney in twenty minutes—"

"All the trains have been stopped by the dispatcher," Penny reassured him, and explained how she had sent out the call for help.

Joe Quigley slumped back in the chair. "If you can telegraph, let the dispatcher know I'm on the job again. This hand of mine's not so hot for sending."

Penny obediently sent the stumbling message, but as she completed it the telegraph sounder became lifeless. Although she still could manipulate the key, the signals had faded completely.

"Now what?" she cried, bewildered.

"The wire's dead!" Quigley exclaimed. Anxiously he glanced toward the storage batteries, fearing that water had damped them out. However, the boxes were high above the floor and still dry.

"What can be wrong?" Penny asked the operator.

"Anything can happen in a mess like this."

Reaching across the table with his good hand, Quigley tested the wire by opening and closing the lifeless telegraph key.

"It's completely out," he declared with finality.

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

Quigley got to his feet. "There's just one chance. The wire may have grounded when the bridge was swept away. Then if it tore loose again we'd be out of service."

"In that case we're up against it."

"Maybe not," Quigley replied. He splashed across the room to the switchboard. "If that should happen to be the trouble, we can ground it here."

He inserted a plug in the groundplate of the switchboard. Immediately the sounder came to life, closing with a sharp click.

"I call that luck!" grinned Quigley. "Now let's try that dispatcher. Want to get him on the wire for me?"

Penny nodded and sat down at the desk again. Insistently she sent out the call, "D-S, D-S, D-S." All the while as she kept the key moving, her thoughts raced ahead. She was afraid that persons had lost their lives in the flood. Property damage was beyond estimate. But catastrophe spelled Big News and she was certain her father would want every detail of the

story for the *Riverview Star*. If only she could send word to him!

"What's the matter?" Quigley asked, his voice impatient. "Can't you get an answer?"

Just then it came—a crisp "I—DS" which told the two listeners that the train dispatcher again was on the wire.

Quigley took over, explaining the break in service and giving the dispatcher such facts as he desired. Hovering at the agent's elbow, Penny asked him if the dispatcher would take an important personal message.

"For the *Riverview Star*," she added quickly. "My father's newspaper."

"I doubt he'll do it," Quigley discouraged her. "This one wire is needed for vital railroad messages. But we'll see."

He tapped out a message and the reply came. It was sent so fast that Penny could not understand the code. Quigley translated it as "Okay, but make it brief."

With no time to compose a carefully worded message, Penny reported the bare facts of the disaster. She addressed the message to her father and signed her own name.

"There, that's off," Quigley said, sagging back in his chair.

Penny saw that the station agent was in no condition to carry on his work.

"You're in bad shape," she said anxiously. "Let me bandage that smashed hand."

"It's nothing. I'll be okay."

"I'll find something to tie it up with," Penny insisted.

In search of bandage material, she crossed the room to a wall closet. As she reached for the door handle, Quigley turned swiftly in his chair.

"No, not there!" he exclaimed.

Penny already had opened the door. Her gaze fastened upon a white roll of cloth on the top shelf. She reached for it and it came fluttering down into her hands—a loose garment fashioned somewhat like a cape with tiny slits cut for eyes. In an instant she knew what it was. Slowly she turned to face Joe Quigley.

"So it was you!" she whispered accusingly. "The Headless Horseman of Sleepy Hollow!"

CHAPTER

21

A MYSTERY EXPLAINED

JOE QUIGLEY did not deny the accusation. He slumped at the telegraph desk, staring straight before him.

"Why did you do it?" Penny asked. "How could you?"

"I don't know—now," Quigley answered heavily. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Penny shook out the garment. The whole, when worn over one's head, would give an appearance of a sheeted goblin with body cut off at the shoulders. She tore off a long strip of the material and began to wrap Quigley's injured hand.

"You've known for a long time, haven't you?" he asked diffidently.

"I suspected it, but I wasn't sure," Penny replied. "Your style of riding is rather spectacular. Last night when I saw Trinidad leap the barrier at Sleepy Hollow I thought I knew."

"Nothing matters now," Quigley said, self accusingly. "Sleepy Hollow's gone."

"Don't you think Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters had any chance to reach the hills?"

"I doubt it. When the dam broke, the water raced down the valley with the speed of an express train. Probably they were caught like rats in a trap."

"It seems too horrible."

"I knew this would happen," Quigley went on. "It was what I fought against. We tried through the Delta Citizens' Committee to get Burmaster to help repair the dam before it was too late. You know what luck we had."

"So failing in ordinary methods, you tried to bring him around with your Headless Horseman stunt?"

"It was a foolish idea," Quigley acknowledged. "Mrs. Lear really put me up to it—not that I'm trying to throw any blame on her. She never liked Mrs. Burmaster, and for good reasons. The Headless Horseman affair started out as a prank, and then I thought I saw a chance to influence Burmaster that way."

"At that he might have come around if it hadn't been for his wife."

"Yes, she was against the town from the first. She hated everyone. Why, she believed that our only thought was to get her away from the valley just to trick her."

"I guess it doesn't matter now," Penny said. "The estate's gone and everyone with it. Somehow I can't realize it—things happened so fast."

"This is a horrible disaster, and it will be worse if help doesn't get here fast," Quigley replied. "Fortunately, the water doesn't seem to be coming higher."

Penny had completed a rough bandaging job on the station agent's hand. Thanking her, he got up to test the two office telephones. Both were out of service.

Presently a message came in over the telegraph wire. It was addressed to Penny and was from her father. Quigley copied it on a pad and handed it to her.

"Thank God you are safe," the message read. "A special circuit will be cut through to the Delta station as soon as possible. Can you give us a complete, running story of the flood?"

"What's a running story?" Quigley asked curiously.

"I think Dad wants me to gather every fact I can," Penny explained. "He wants a continuous story—enough material to fill a wire for several hours."

"You'll do it?"

"I don't know," Penny said doubtfully. "I've never handled a story as big as this—I've had no experience on anything so important."

"There's no other person to do it."

"I want to find Louise," Penny went on, rereading the message. "I ought to try to learn what happened to poor Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters."

"Listen," Quigley argued quietly. "You can't do anything for your friends now. Don't you see it's your duty to get news out to the country? Your father expects it of you."

Penny remained silent.

"Don't you realize there's no one else to send the news?" Quigley demanded. "You're probably the only reporter within miles of here."

"But I'm not really a reporter. I've written stories for Dad's paper, it's true. But not big stories such as this."

"Red Valley needs help. The only way to get it is by arousing the public. Do I wire your father 'yes' or 'no'?"

"Make it 'yes,' " Penny decided. "Tell Dad I'll try to have something for him in an hour."

"You'll need longer than that," Quigley advised. "Anyhow, it's apt to be several hours before we get a special wire through."

While the agent sent the message, Penny searched the office for pencil and paper.

"You won't get far without shoes," Quigley said over his shoulder. "What became of yours?"

"Left them over on the hillside."

"Well, you can't go back for them now," Quigley

replied, gazing ruefully through the window at the racing torrent which separated the station from the high hill. "Let's see what we can find for you."

He rummaged through the closet and came upon a pair of boots which looked nearly small enough for Penny.

"We had a boy who wore those when he worked here," he explained. "See if they'll do. And here's my coat."

"Oh, I can't take it," Penny protested. "You'll need it yourself."

"No, I'm sticking here at my post," Quigley answered. "I'll be warm enough."

He insisted that Penny wear the coat. She left the station and waded toward higher ground. The coat over her drenched clothing offered only slight protection from the chill wind. With the sun dropping low, she knew that soon she would actually suffer from cold.

Penny wondered where to start in gathering vital facts for her father. The flood had followed the narrow V-shaped valley, cutting a swath of destruction above Delta, and there spreading out to the lowlands. She decided to tour the outlying section of Delta first, view the wreckage and question survivors.

"If only Salt were here!" she thought. "Dad would want pictures, but there's no way for me to take them."

Keeping to the hillside, Penny reached a high point of land overlooking what had been the town of Delta. Two or three streets remained as before. One of the few business places still standing was the big white stone building that housed the local telephone company. Elsewhere there was only water and scattered debris.

Penny headed up the valley, passing and meeting groups of bedraggled refugees who had taken to the hills at the first alarm. She questioned everyone. Nevertheless, definite information eluded her. How many lives had been lost? How great was the property damage? What fate had befallen Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters? No one seemed to know.

Half sick with despair, she kept on. She jotted down names and facts. Mr. Bibbs, an old man who ran a weekly newspaper at Delta, was able to help her more than anyone else. Not only did he give her a partial list of the known missing, but he recited many other facts that had escaped Penny.

"A million thanks—" she began gratefully, but he waved her into silence.

"Just get back to the railroad station and send your story," he urged.

Penny lost all count of time as she retraced her way along the muddy hillside. Everywhere she saw suffering and destruction. Her mind was so numbed to

the sight that she recorded impressions automatically.

It was long after nightfall before Penny reached the station. Every muscle protested as she dragged herself wearily to the doorstep. During her absence the flood had lowered by nearly a foot. However, the current remained swift, and she steadied herself for a moment against the building wall.

"Who's there?" called Quigley sharply.

"Penny Parker."

"Okay, come on in," the agent invited. "Thought you might be a looter."

Penny pushed open the door. The waiting room was filled with men, women and children who slumped in cold misery on the uncomfortable row of seats. Few were provided with any warm clothing.

Penny splashed through the dark, musty room to the inner office. Quigley had lighted a smoky oil lamp which revealed that he had made himself a bed on top of the telegraph desk.

"I'm turning in for the night," he explained. "There's nothing more we can do until morning."

"How about my story to the *Star?*" Penny asked wearily. "Is the special wire set up yet?"

"Don't make me laugh," Quigley replied. "The Dispatcher's wire went out for good over an hour ago. Too bad you killed yourself to get that story, because it will have to wait."

"But it mustn't wait," Penny protested. "Dad's counting on me. I gave my promise. How about the telephone company?"

"Their lines are all down."

"Western Union?"

"It's the same with them. Repair crews are on their way here but it will take time. The valley's completely cut off from communication."

"For how long?"

"Listen, Penny, you know as much about it as I do. The airfields are under water."

"How about the roads?"

"Open only part of the way."

Completely discouraged, Penny sagged into a chair by the ticket counter. She was wet through, plastered with mud, hungry, and tired enough to collapse. After all of her work and suffering, her efforts had been in vain. By morning experienced city reporters and photographers would swarm into the valley. Her scoop would be no scoop at all.

"Oh, brace up," Quigley encouraged carelessly.

"But I've failed Dad. It would mean a lot to him to get an exclusive story of this disaster. I gave him my promise I'd send the facts—now I've failed."

"It's not your fault the wire couldn't be set up," Quigley tried to encourage her. "Here, I managed to get ahold of a blanket for you. Wrap up in it and

grab some sleep. You'll need your strength tomorrow."

"I guess you're right," Penny acknowledged gloomily.

Taking off the muddy boots, she rolled herself into the warm blanket. Curling up into the chair she pillowed her head on the desk and slept the untroubled sleep of complete exhaustion.

CHAPTER

22

WANTED—A WIRE

TOWARD MORNING Penny awoke to find her limbs stiff and cramped. Murky, fetid water still flowed over the floor of the station. However, it had lowered during the night, leaving a rim of oozy mud to mark the office walls. The first ray of light streamed through the broken window.

Penny yawned and stretched her cramped feet. She felt wretched and dirty. Her clothing was stiff and caked with mud. She scraped off what she could and washed face and hands in a basin of water she found at the back end of the room.

When she returned, Joe Quigley was awake.

"My neck! My arm! My whole anatomy!" he complained, rubbing a hand over his stubbly beard. "I'm a cripple for life."

"I feel the same way," Penny grinned. "I'm hungry too. Anything to eat around here?"

"Not a crumb. The folks out in the waiting room

broke into all the vending machines last night. There's not so much as a piece of candy left."

"And there's no place in Delta where food can be bought."

"Not that I know of. Only a few relief kitchens were set up last night. They can't begin to take care of the mob.

Penny peered out into the crowded waiting room. Mothers with babies in their arms had sat there all night. Some of the refugees were weeping; others accepted their lot with stoical calm. Seeing such misery, Penny forgot her own hunger and discomfort.

"Don't you think help will come soon?" she asked Quigley.

"Hard to tell," he replied. "It should."

Penny went out into the waiting room but there was very little she could do to help the unfortunate sufferers. She gave one of the women her blanket.

"That was foolish of you," Quigley told her a moment later. "You'll likely need it yourself."

"I'd rather go without," Penny replied. "Anyway, I can't bear to stay here any longer. I'm going to the telephone office."

"Why there?"

"The building stands high and should be one of the first places to reopen," Penny declared hopefully. "Maybe I can get a long distance call through to Dad."

"Better leave some of your story with me," advised Quigley. "If we get a wire before the telephone company does, I'll try to send it for you."

Penny scribbled a hundred word message, packing it solidly with facts. If ever it reached Riverview a *Star* rewrite man could enlarge it to at least a column.

Saying goodbye to Joe, Penny made her way toward all that remained of Delta's business section. She had not seen Louise since the previous afternoon and was greatly worried about her.

"I know she's safe," she told herself. "But I must find her."

Penny was not alone on the devastated streets. Refugees wandered aimlessly about, seeking loved ones or treasured possessions. Long lines of shivering people waited in front of a church that had been converted into a soup kitchen.

Penny joined the line. Just as a woman handed her a steaming cup of hot broth, she heard her name spoken. Turning quickly, she saw Louise running toward her from across the street.

"Penny! Penny!" her chum cried joyfully.

"Careful," Penny cautioned, balancing the cup of soup. "This broth is as precious as gold."

"Oh, you poor thing!" cried Louise, hugging her convulsively. "You look dreadful."

"That's because I'm so hungry," Penny laughed. "Have you had anything to eat?"

"Oh, yes, I stayed at that farmhouse on the hill last night. I actually had a bed to sleep in and a good hot breakfast this morning. But I've been dreadfully worried about you."

"And that goes double," answered Penny. "Wait until I gobble this soup, and we'll compare notes."

She drank the broth greedily and the girls walked away from the church. Penny then told of her experiences since leaving her chum on the hillside. Louise was much relieved to learn that word had been sent to Riverview of their safety.

"But what of Mrs. Lear and the Burmasters?" she asked anxiously. "Have you heard what happened to them?"

Penny shook her head. "Joe Quigley thinks they didn't have a chance."

"I can't comprehend it somehow," Louise said with a shudder. "It just doesn't seem possible. Why, we were guests in Mrs. Lear's home less than twenty-four hours ago."

"I know," agreed Penny soberly. "I keep hoping that somehow they escaped."

"If only we could learn the truth."

"There's not a chance to get through now," Penny said slowly. "The water's gone down a little, but not enough."

"If we had a boat—"

"The current is still so swift we couldn't handle it."

"I suppose not," Louise admitted hopelessly. "When do you suppose the Relief folks will get here?"

"They should be moving in at any time. And when they come they'll probably be trailed by a flock of reporters and photographers."

"This flood will be a big story," Louise acknowledged.

"Big? It's one of the greatest news stories of the year! And here I am, helpless to send out a single word of copy."

"You mean that folks outside of the valley don't know about the flood?" Louise gasped.

"The news went out, but only as a flash. Before we could give any details, our only wire connection was lost."

"Then the first reporter to get his news out of the valley will have a big story?"

"That's the size of it," Penny nodded. "The worst of it is that Dad's depending upon me."

"But he can't expect you to do the impossible. If there are no wire connections it's not your fault. Anyhow, as soon as one is set up you'll be able to send your story."

"Other reporters will be here by that time. Experienced men. Maybe they'll get the jump on me."

"I'll venture they won't!" Louise said with emphasis. "You've never failed yet on a story."

"This is more than a story, Lou. It's a great human tragedy. Somehow I don't feel a bit like a reporter—I just feel bewildered and rather stunned."

"You're tired and half sick," Louise said. She linked arms with Penny and guided her away from the long line of refugees.

"Where to?" she asked after they had wandered for some distance.

"I was starting for the telephone company office when I met you."

"Why the telephone office?" Louise asked.

"Well, it's high and dry. I thought that by some chance they might have a wire connection."

"Then let's go there by all means," urged Louise.

Farther down the debris-clogged street the girls came to the telephone company offices. The building, one of the newest and tallest in Delta, had been gutted by the flood. However, the upper floors remained dry and emergency quarters had been established there. Nearly all employees were at their posts.

Penny and Louise pushed their way through the throng of refugees that had taken possession of the lower floor. Climbing the stairs to the telephone offices they asked to see the manager.

"Mr. Nordwall isn't seeing anyone," they were informed. "He's very busy."

Penny persisted. She explained that her business was urgent and concerned getting a news story

through to Riverview. After a long delay she was allowed to talk to the manager, a harassed, overworked man named Nordwall.

"Please state your case briefly," he said wearily.

Penny explained again that she wished to get a story of the flood through to her father's paper, and asked what hope there was.

"Not much, I'm afraid," the man replied. "We haven't a single toll line at present."

"How soon do you expect to get one?"

The manager hesitated, unwilling to commit himself. "By noon we may have one wire west," he said reluctantly.

Penny asked if she could have first chance at it. Nordwall regretfully shook his head.

"Relief work must come before news."

"Then there's no way to get my story out?"

"I suggest that you place your call in the usual way," Mr. Nordwall instructed. "I'll tell our Long Distance Chief Operator to put it ahead of everything except relief work messages."

Penny obeyed the manager's suggestion. However, she and Louise both knew that there was slight chance the call would go through in time to do any good.

"No use waiting around here," Penny said gloomily. "The wire won't even be set up before noon."

Leaving the telephone building, the girls sloshed

back toward the railroad. Suddenly Louise drew Penny's attention to an airplane flying low overhead. It flew so close to the ground that they could read "United Press," on the wings.

"Well, it looks as if the news boys are moving in," Penny observed. "Probably taking photographs of the flood."

The airplane circled Delta and then vanished eastward. Walking on, the girls met an armed soldier who passed them without a glance.

"The National Guard," Penny commented. "That means a road is open."

"And it means that help is here at last!" Louise cried. "Property will be protected now and some order will be established!"

Penny remained silent.

"Aren't you glad?" Louise demanded, staring at her companion.

"Yes, I'm glad," Penny said slowly. "I truly am. But the opening of the road means that within a very little while every news service in the country will have men here."

"And you've lost your chance to send an exclusive story to the *Star*."

"I've let Dad down," Penny admitted. "He depended upon me and I failed him dismally."

CHAPTER

23

TOLL LINE TO RIVERVIEW

PENNY AND Louise trudged slowly on toward the railroad tracks. They were too discouraged for much conversation, and avoided speaking of Mrs. Lear or the Burmasters. Sleepy Hollow had been washed away, but no one could tell them what had happened to the unfortunate ones caught in the valley.

"It doesn't matter now," Penny said dispiritedly, "but I know who masqueraded as the Headless Horseman. Joe Quigley."

"The station agent!"

"Yes, he told me about it last night. Of course Mrs. Lear let him use her horse, and no doubt she encouraged him in the idea."

"They did it to plague the Burmasters?"

"Joe thought he could bring Mr. Burmaster around to his way of thinking about the Huntley Dam."

"How stupid everyone was," Louise sighed. "If

it hadn't been for Mrs. Burmaster's stubbornness, her husband might have given the money to save the dam. Then this dreadful disaster would have been prevented."

Penny nodded absently. Her gaze was fixed upon a stout man just ahead who wore climbing irons on his heavy shoes. She nudged Louise.

"See that fellow?"

"Why, yes. What about him?"

"I'm sure he's a telephone lineman. Probably he's working on the line by the railroad."

"Probably," Louise agreed, without much interest.

"Come on," Penny urged, quickening pace. "Let's talk to him."

The girls overtook the workman and fell into step. Penny questioned him and readily learned that he was working close by at the washed-out railroad bridge.

"We're aiming to shoot a wire across the river," the man volunteered. "It's going to be one tough little job."

"Mind if we go along?" Penny asked eagerly.

"It's okay with me," the telephone man consented. "Hard walking though."

Flood waters had receded from the railroad right-of-way leaving a long stretch of twisted rails and slimey road-bed. They waded through the mud, soon coming to the break where the bridge had swung aside. Debris of every variety had piled high against

the wrecked steel structure. Flood water boiled through the gap at a furious rate.

"I don't see how they'll ever get a cable across there," Penny commented dubiously.

"Coast Guardsmen are helping us," the lineman explained. "They'll shoot it over with a Lyle gun—we hope."

Penny and Louise wandered toward the gap in the roadbed. On both shores, linemen and cable spilcers were hard at work. Coast Guardsmen already had set up their equipment and all was in readiness to shoot a cable across the river.

"Okay, let 'er go!" rang out the terse order. "Stand clear!"

A Coast Guardsman raised the Lyle gun. Making certain that the steel wire would run free, he released the trigger. The weighted cable flashed through the air in a beautiful arch only to fall short of its goal.

"Not enough allowance for the wind," the guardsman said in disgust. "We'll need a heavier charge."

The gun was reloaded, and again the wire spun from its spool. Again it fell short of the far shore by three feet. Undaunted by failure, the men tried once more. This time the aim was true, and the heavy powder charge carried rod and cable to its mark.

"They've done it!" Penny cried jubilantly. "Now it shouldn't be long before we get a wire connection with the outside world!"

Immediately telephone company men seized the flexible cable, anchoring it solidly. Heavy cables then were drawn across and made fast, permitting a courageous lineman in a bosun's chair to work high above the turbulent river.

"If that cable should break, he'd be lost!" Louise said with a shudder. "It makes me jumpy to watch him."

Fearlessly the man accomplished his task, suspending a temporary emergency telephone line. Cable splicers promptly carried the ends of the new cable to terminal boxes.

So absorbed was Penny in watching the task that for a time she forgot her own urgent need of a message wire. But as she observed the men talking over a test phone, the realization suddenly came to her that a through wire had been established west from Red Valley.

"Lou, they've done it!" she exclaimed. "The wire connection is made!"

"It does look that way."

"If only I could use that test set to get my news story through to Dad!"

"Fat chance!"

"I'd still be the first to send out the story!" Penny went on excitedly. "It will do no harm to ask anyhow."

Breaking away from Louise, she sought the lineman

of her acquaintance. Eagerly she broached her request.

"Not a chance to use that line, Sister," he answered impatiently. "Our 'phones are for testing purposes only."

"But this is a very great emergency—"

"Sorry," the lineman brought her up short. "You'll have to put your call through the regular channels. Regulations."

Baffled by the cold refusal, Penny turned away. Even though she knew the telephone man had no authority to grant her request, she was none the less annoyed.

"This is enough to drive one mad!" she complained to Louise. "It may be hours before the downtown telephone office will offer toll service."

"Well, it does no good to fret about it," her chum shrugged. "There's nothing you can do."

"I'm not so sure about that," Penny muttered.

Her attention had been drawn to a man in a gray business suit who was talking earnestly to the fireman of the line gang.

"That's Mr. Nordwall!" she announced.

Again abandoning Louise, she pushed through the throng of spectators. Touching the man's arm to attract his attention, she said breathlessly:

"Mr. Nordwall, do you remember me?"

He gazed at her without recognition.

"I'm Penny Parker. I want to get a message through to my father."

"Oh, yes, now I remember!" the telephone company manager exclaimed. "You're trying to send a call through to Riverview."

"Is there any reason why I can't use the phone now —the test instrument?"

"Such a procedure would be very irregular."

"But it would save hours in getting my story through," Penny went on quickly. "Hundreds of persons are desperately in need of food and shelter. If the public can be aroused by newspaper publicity, funds will be subscribed generously. Mr. Nordwall, you must let me send my story!"

"This is a very great emergency," the manager agreed. "I'll see what can be done."

Penny waited, scarcely daring to hope. However, Mr. Nordwall kept his word. To the delight of the girls, the call was put through. Within ten minutes Penny was summoned to the test box.

"You have your connection with Riverview," she was told. "Go ahead."

Penny raised the receiver to her ear. Her hand trembled she was so nervous and excited. She spoke tensely into the transmitter: "Hello, is this the *Star* office?"

"Anthony Parker speaking," said the voice of her father.

"Dad, this is Penny! I have the story for you!"

She heard her father's voice at the other end of the line but it became so weak she could not distinguish a word. Nor could he understand her. The connection had failed.

CHAPTER

24

A BIG STORY

PENNY DESPAIRED, fearing that she never could make her father understand what she had to tell him. Then unexpectedly the wire trouble cleared and Mr. Parker's voice fairly boomed in her ear.

"Is that you, Penny? Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, Dad!" she answered eagerly. "And so is Louise! We have the story for you—couldn't get it out before."

"Thought we never would hear from you again," Mr. Parker said, his voice vibrant. "Your flash on the flood scooped the country. We're still ahead of the other newspapers. Shoot me all the facts."

Penny talked rapidly but distinctly. Facts had been imprinted indelibly on her memory. She had no need to refer to notes except to verify names. Now and then Mr. Parker interrupted to ask a question. When the story had been told he said crisply:

"You've done marvelously, Penny! But we'll need

more names. Get as complete a list of the missing as you can."

"I'll try, Dad."

"And pictures. So far all we have are a few airplane shots of the flooded valley. Can you get ahold of a camera?"

"I doubt it," Penny said dubiously.

"Try anyhow," her father urged. "And keep on the lookout for Salt Sommers. He's on his way there now with two reporters. They're bringing in a portable wire photo set."

"Then you plan to send flood pictures direct from here to Riverview?"

"That's the set up," Mr. Parker replied. "If you can get the pictures and have them waiting, we'll beat every other paper in the country!"

"I'll do my best," Penny promised. "But it's a hard assignment."

She talked a moment longer before abandoning the test 'phone to one of the linemen. Seeking Louise, she repeated the conversation.

"But how can we get a camera?" her chum asked hopelessly. "Delta's stores are under water—most of them at least."

Though the situation seemed impossible, the girls tramped from one debris-clogged street to another. After an hour's search they came upon a man who was snapping pictures with a box camera. Ques-

tioned by Penny, he agreed to part with it for twenty dollars.

"I haven't that many cents," Penny admitted. "But my father is owner of the *Riverview Star*. I'll guarantee that you'll receive your money later."

"How do I know I'll ever see you again?"

"You don't," said Penny. "You'll just have to trust me."

"You look honest," the man agreed after a pause. "I'll take a chance."

He gave Penny the camera, together with three rolls of film. The girls carefully wrote down his name and address.

"Now to get our pictures," Penny said, as she and Louise started on once more. "We'll take a few of the streets. Then I want to get some human-interest shots."

"How about the railroad station?" Louise suggested. "A great many of the refugees are being cared for there."

Penny nodded assent. Hastening toward the depot, they paused several times to snap pictures they thought were especially suitable for newspaper reproduction.

Along the railroad right-of-way crews of men were hard at work, but it was evident that it would be days before train service could be resumed.

Penny and Louise went into the crowded waiting

room of the depot. Joe Quigley had locked himself into the inner office, but even there he was surrounded by a group of argumentative young men.

"Reporters!" Penny observed alertly. "I knew it wouldn't take them long to get here!"

The newspaper men were bombarding Quigley with questions, demanding to know when and how they could send out their newspaper copy.

"I can't help you, boys," he said regretfully. "It will be two hours at least before we have wire service. Better try the telephone company."

Just then one of the newsmen spied Penny and her camera. Immediately he hailed her. The other reporters flocked about the two girls, offering to buy any of the films at fancy prices.

"Sorry," Penny declined. "My pictures are earmarked for the *Riverview Star*."

"What? Didn't you hear?" one of the men bantered. "Their wire photo car broke down just this side of Hobostein. The *Star* won't move in here before night. By then your pictures will be old stuff."

"Better sell to us," urged another.

Penny shook her head. She wasn't sure whether or not the men were joking. In any case she meant to hold her pictures until her father released them.

Between Hobostein and Delta there was only one highway over which a car could pass. The arrival

of newspaper men led Penny to believe that this road now was open.

"Dad told me to keep a sharp watch for Salt Sommers," she said to Louise. "Let's post ourselves by the road where we can see incoming cars."

"What about the pictures we planned to take here?"

"I do want to snap one or two," Penny admitted. "It's embarrassing though, just to walk up to a group and ask to take a picture."

As the girls debated, the door swung open. Into the already over-crowded room stumbled a new group of refugees.

Suddenly Penny's gaze fastened upon a haggard woman who looked grotesque in a man's overcoat many sizes too large for her. The face was half-buried in the high collar, and she could not see it plainly. Then the woman turned, and Penny recognized her.

"Mrs. Burmaster!" she cried.

The woman stared at the two girls with leaden eyes. She did not seem to recognize them.

"Oh, we're so glad you're safe!" Penny cried, rushing to her. "Your husband?"

Mrs. Burmaster's lips moved, but no sound came. She seemed stunned by what she had gone through.

"Do you know what happened to Mrs. Lear?" Penny asked anxiously. "Have you heard?"

Even then Mrs. Burmaster did not speak. But a strange light came into her eyes.

"Tell me," Penny urged. "Please."

Her words seemed to penetrate the befogged mind of the dazed woman. Mrs. Burmaster's lips moved slightly. Penny bent closer to hear.

"Mrs. Lear is dead," the woman whispered. "She was drowned when she saved me."

CHAPTER

25

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

THE INFORMATION shocked Penny.

"Mrs. Lear—dead," she repeated. "Oh, I was hoping that somehow she escaped."

"She would have if it hadn't been for me," Mrs. Burmaster said dully. "Ten minutes before the dam gave way, a telephone warning was sent out. Mrs. Lear thought my husband and I might not have heard it. She rode her horse to Sleepy Hollow, intending to warn us."

"And then what happened?"

"Just as Mrs. Lear reached our place, the wall of water came roaring down the valley. We all ran out of the house, hoping to reach the hills. We did get to higher ground but we saw we couldn't make it. Mrs. Lear made my husband and me climb into a tree. Before she could follow us, the water came."

"Mrs. Lear was swept away?"

"Yes, we saw her struggling and then the water

carried her beyond sight." Mrs. Burmaster covered her face. "Oh, it was horrible! And to think that it was all my fault!"

"Where is your husband now?" Penny inquired kindly.

"Outside, I think," Mrs. Burmaster murmured. "We were brought here together in a boat."

Penny and Louise went outdoors and after a brief search found Mr. Burmaster. His clothing was caked with mud, his face was unshaven and he looked years older.

To his wife's story he could add little. "This has been a dreadful shock," he told Penny. "Now that it's too late I realize what a stubborn fool I was. My wife and I are responsible for Mrs. Lear's death."

"No, no, you mustn't say that," Penny tried to comfort him. "It was impossible for anyone to predict what would happen."

"Sleepy Hollow is gone—completely washed away," Mr. Burmaster went on bitterly. "The estate cost me a fortune."

"But you can rebuild."

"I never shall. My wife never could be happy in Red Valley. Now that this terrible thing has occurred, it would be intolerable to remain. I've been thinking matters over. I've decided to deed all the land I bought back to the valley folk. It's the least I can do to right a great wrong."

"It would be very generous of you," said Penny, her eyes shining.

The girls talked with Mr. Burmaster for a little while and then started toward US highway 20, intending to watch incoming cars. Ambulances, army and supply trucks now were flowing into Delta in a steady stream. However, midway there, they spied a car coming toward them which bore "*Riverview Star*" on its windshield.

"There's Salt now!" Penny cried, signaling frantically.

The car stopped with a jerk. The *Star* photographer sat behind the wheel, while beside him were two men from the paper's news department.

"Well, well," Salt greeted the girls jovially. He swung open the car door. "If it isn't Penny, the child wonder! Meet Roy Daniels and Joe Wiley."

Acknowledging the introduction, Penny and Louise squeezed into the front seat of the sedan. Driving on, Salt plied them with questions. Penny told him how rival newsmen had tried to buy her camera pictures.

"Good for you, hanging onto them!" Salt approved warmly. "Our car never did break down. By the way, where can we set up our portable wire photo equipment?"

"There's only one possibility. The telephone company. Right now they have the only wire service in Delta."

Penny directed Salt through the few streets that were clear of debris to the telephone building. There the portable wire photo equipment quickly was set up. Penny's camera pictures were developed, and though some of the shots were over-exposed there were four good enough to send over the network.

"Mr. Nordwall has six toll lines out of Delta now," Salt told the girls jubilantly. "He's letting us have one of them."

Carefully the photographer tested the controls of the wire photo machine. He listened briefly to the hum of the motor. Satisfied that everything was running properly, he attached one of the freshly printed pictures to the transmitting cylinder.

"Okay," he signaled to Mr. Nordwall. "Give us a toll to the *Riverview Star*."

Within a few minutes the order came: "Network clear. Go ahead, Delta."

Salt turned on a switch and the sending cylinder began to revolve. One by one Penny's pictures were transmitted over the wire.

"Your shots are the first to get out of Red Valley!" Salt told her triumphantly. "Your work's done now. Better crawl off somewhere and sleep."

Penny nodded wearily. She was glad to know that the *Star* would scoop every other paper in the country on the flood story and pictures. Still, for some reason she couldn't feel very happy about it. As she turned

away, Salt called: "Hey, wait! Your father's on the wire photo phone. He wants to talk to you."

Penny caught up the receiver eagerly.

"That you, Penny?" a blurred voice asked in her ear. "Congratulations! You came through with flying colors!"

"Guess I was lucky to come through at all," Penny said slowly. "Some weren't so fortunate."

"Just now the important thing is when are you coming home?" Mr. Parker asked. "Can you get here today?"

To Penny, the thought of home and a soft bed was more alluring than any other earthly bliss.

"I'll certainly try, Dad," she promised. "Yes, somehow I'll get there."

After Penny ended the conversation with her father, she and Louise talked to Salt about the prospects of a trip home. Regretfully he explained that with a big story to cover, he probably would not be leaving that day.

"But there are plenty of cars going out of here," he encouraged them. "Why not go down to the depot and make inquiries."

The idea seemed an excellent one. At the station the girls talked again with Joe Quigley who assured them he knew of a car that was leaving very shortly.

"Hurry out to Highway 20 and I think you can catch the fellow," he urged.

Hastily saying goodbye not only to Joe but to Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster who remained in the crowded station, the girls went outside. As they rounded a corner of the building a voice fairly boomed at them: "Hello, folks!"

Penny and Louise whirled around to see Silas Malcom coming toward them. Clinging to his arm was a spry little woman in a borrowed coat and hat.

"Mrs. Lear!" gasped the girls in one voice.

"It takes more than a flood to wash me away!" chirped the old lady, bright as a cricket.

Penny and Louise rushed to embrace her. Eagerly they plied her with questions.

"I'm jest like a cat with nine lives," old Mrs. Lear chuckled. "When the flood carried me off, I didn't give up—not me. I was a purty good swimmer as a gal and I ain't so bad even now. I kinda went with the current until I got ahold of a log. There I clung until a Red Cross boat picked me up."

Mrs. Lear's safe arrival at Delta thrilled Penny and Louise. They rushed into the station to bring Mr. and Mrs. Burmaster who shared their great relief over the rescue. And Penny was delighted when Mr. Burmaster repeated to the old lady what he had told her —that he intended to allow his property to revert to the former tenants.

"That's mighty good of you, Mr. Burmaster," the old lady thanked him. "What we've been through

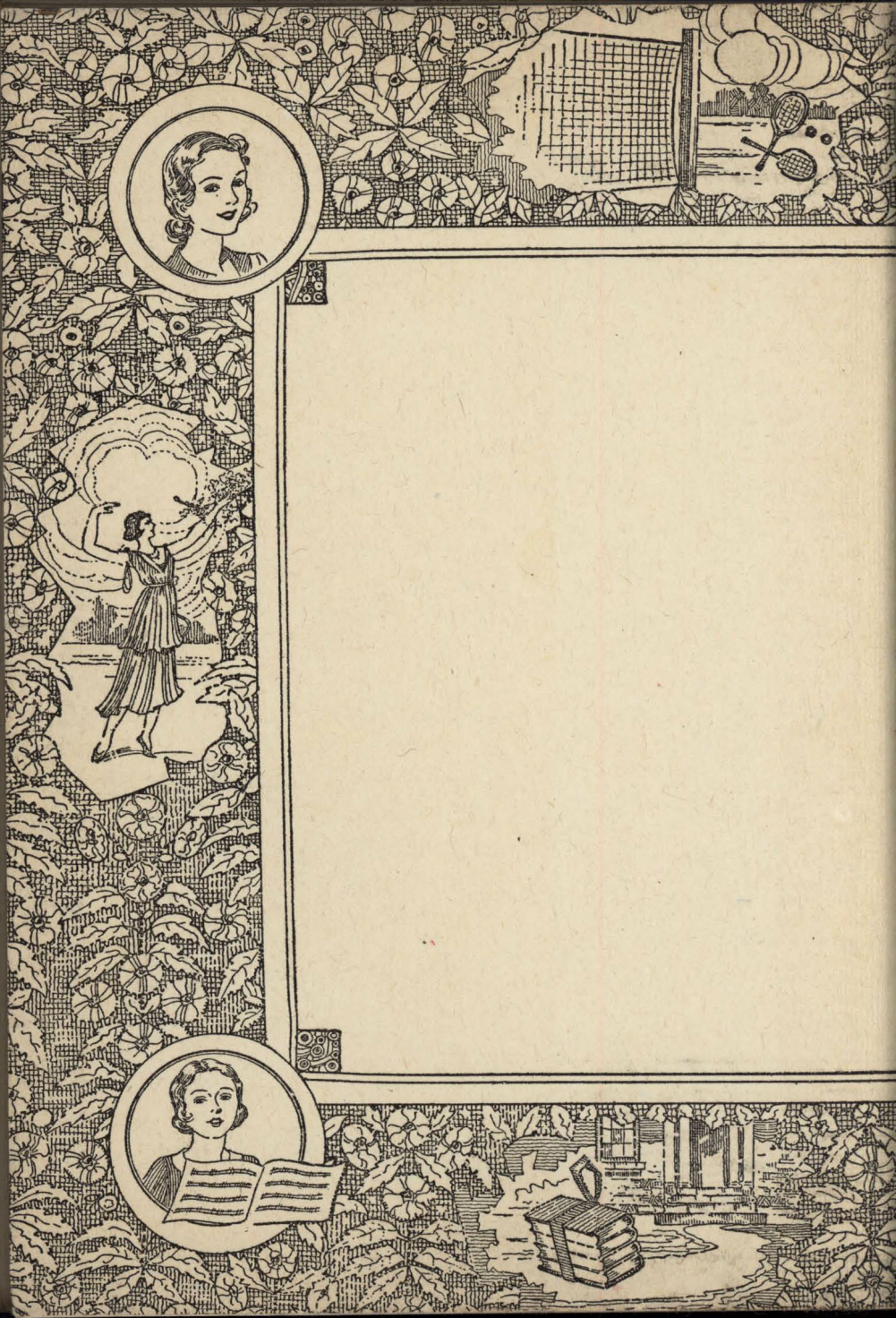
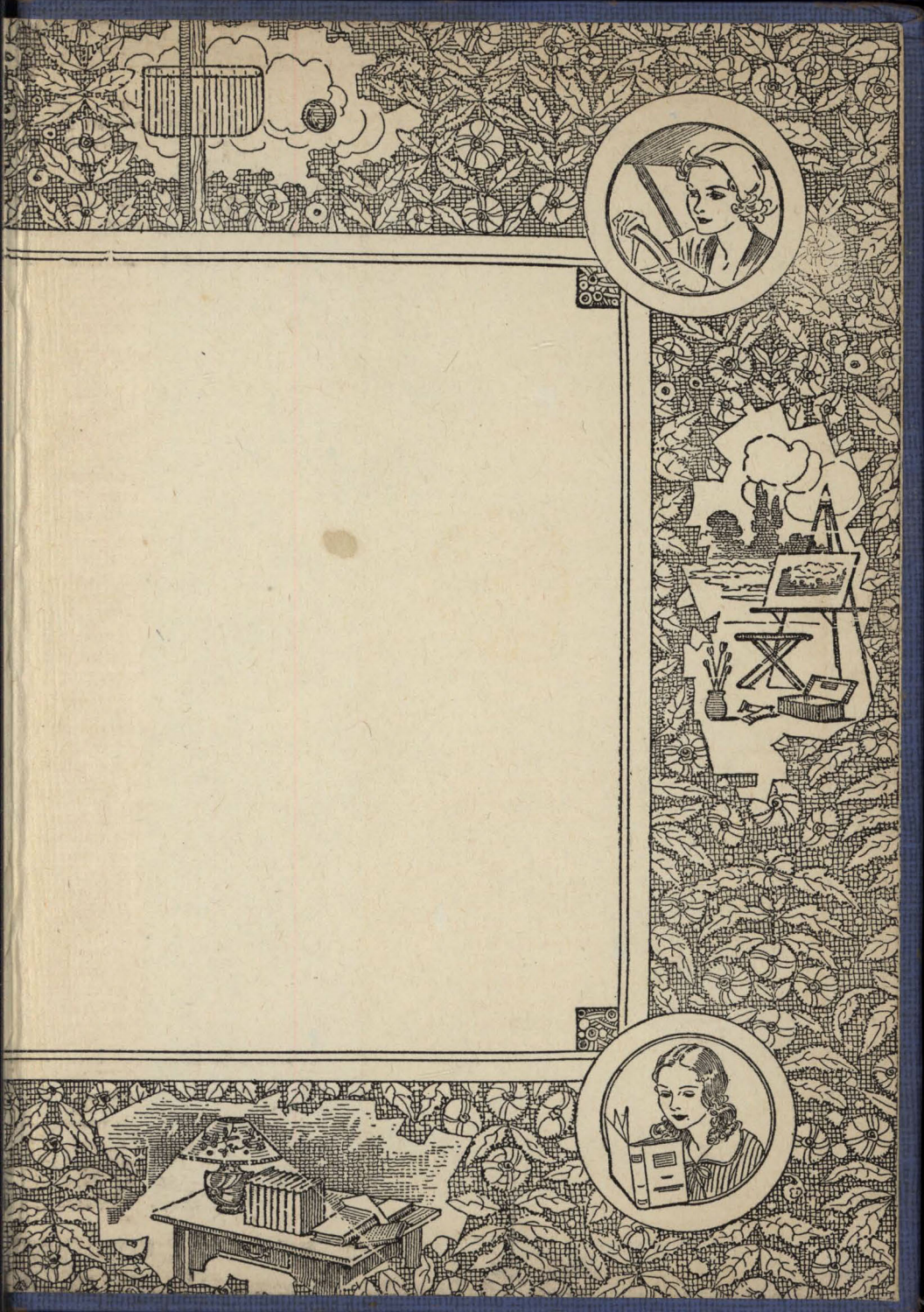
has taught us all a bitter lesson. I'm ashamed of the way I acted."

"You were justified in your attitude," the estate owner acknowledged.

"No, I wasn't. It was childish o' me tryin' to take my spite out on your wife. I'm especially sorry about the way I egged Joe Quigley onto that Headless Horseman trick."

"I was afraid you were behind it," smiled Mr. Burmaster. "Oh, well, it all seems trivial now. We'll forget everything."

"There are some things," said Penny quietly, "that I doubt we'll ever erase from our minds." She turned to the old lady and asked: "Won't you come to Riverview with Louise and me? You'll need a place to stay—"

Mrs. Lear's gaze met hers, challengingly but with a twinkle of humor.

"And what better place could I have than this?" she demanded with quiet finality. "Red Valley is my home, and my home it will be till the end o' time!"